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Zen and the ESOL teacher's journey to cross-cultural communicative competence

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

I dedicate this thesis to the *others* who helped me see myself first as *other* too, then simply as part of the One.

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Introduction and Purpose

Polish students smilingly give flowers on teachers' day, and gifts at the end of the school year. Unmarried female teachers who live on school premises surrounded by high walls, and guarded gates, in Kashmir, India, must seek permission from the principal if they wish to leave the grounds in the evening. Chinese students sit silent as quail, as questions thrown out to the class in general float in the air, doomed to remain forever unanswered. The oldest male in a discussion group in a Korean classroom is always deferred to. Even wealthy students will often wear the same clothes for a week in Nepal.

It is doubtful that any of us reading these statements will refrain from labeling the cultural norms they describe as either good or bad, depending on our personal preferences and cultural perspective. As Wood explains, "Because Western culture is hierarchical, we're taught to perceive differences as better and worse not simply as different" (1994, p.155). We use our own culture as the yardstick against which to measure the merits of the disparities we distinguish, but we rarely turn the eye of critical comparison we focus on the other, inwards on our culture and ourselves.

In the reality that we co-construct with our culture, through our mutually accepted definitions of that which surrounds us, why do we allow this to be so? Perhaps it is the insecurity that lurks in our inner landscape. We fear change, so

avert our minds from deep examination of our selves and our customs lest we find them wanting, and the foundations of our way of being crumble. Without emptying our minds and questioning the thoughts that arise, we cling tight to our ways of thought and traditions. We attach to our opinions, and defend them as the 'right' way without acknowledging that contradictory world-views can share harmonious co-existence. We remain blind to the fact that there is no universally correct way of being; each way is just as it is.

To perceive things as they are without distortion, we need to see them with a clear mind. Clear mind is the mind before thinking, it has no inside and no outside, it is Zen mind. When you walk through the forest on a warm fall day, hear the birds sing and the leaves crunch underfoot, see the squirrels run up a tree their tails flaming bright in the illumination of the sun's slanting rays, breathe the smell of wood smoke and your mind is autumn, nothing but autumn, that is Zen mind. When you tell yourself how wonderful it is that you are warm today, that the day is beautiful, that the squirrels are less numerous this year and that the smoke reminds you of fishing with your father that is thinking-mind. You are coloring 'what is' with your opinions.

It is the thinking mind that labels ideas and forms, and attachment to our ways of thinking that makes us perceive things as right or wrong. As Zen Master Seung Sahn said:

> Four blind men went to the zoo and visited the elephant. One blind man touched its side and said, 'The elephant is like a wall.' The next blind man touched its trunk and said, 'The elephant is like a snake.' The next blind man touched its leg and said, 'The elephant is like a column.' The last blind man touched its tail and said, 'The elephant is like a broom.' Then the four blind men started to fight, each one believing that his opinion was the right one.

> Each only understood the part he had touched; none of them understood the whole (Mitchell, p. 3-4).

To see things just as they are, we must let go of our opinions, "the sky is blue, the grass is green" (Mitchell, p. 231) there is nothing more to add. If each of the blind men had let go of their opinions and heard the reality described by each of the others, they would have perceived that the elephant was a great deal more than their own small idea of it.

What is cross cultural communicative competence? Why is it important for teachers of English to speakers of other languages, to see things just the way they are? Why is it necessary for them to put aside the hierarchical perspective formed by Western culture and see difference simply as variation, neither intrinsically better nor worse than that which is familiar? How can keeping Zen mind, and the practice of mindfulness, which Gunaratna (1991), describes as "non-judgmental observation... that ability of the mind to observe without criticism...[to] see things without condemnation or judgment" (p. 151) help make us better teachers? To answer these questions, I must first go back a little.

In 1995, I left England to teach English abroad. By the end of four years of teaching in three different countries, Poland, Hong Kong, and South Korea, I had met many different ESOL teachers. Each of them, like me, carried strong opinions of what we liked and disliked about the cultures we had lived in. We tended to judge a society on whether its customs pleased or displeased us, and we openly discussed each one's faults, and praised its strengths. We were being typically ethnocentric, by assuming our "culture is right and normal and ...assess[ing] all other cultures by how

closely they resemble[d] ...[our] own" (Varner and Beamer, 2000, p13). It became clear, after those of us that had taught in the same countries compared our experiences, that the societies we were most comfortable in, had 'better students', than the societies in which we felt uneasy. For example, those of us that had enjoyed the challenge and experience of teaching in Poland, and had not minded "learn[ing] new ways to think, feel and behave...[in order to attain] acculturation"(Kim, p. 393), nor minded "unlearning some of ...[our] childhood cultural patterns...[so as to achieve] deculturation" (Kim, p. 393), found the students responsive, eager to learn and hardworking. While those of us who remembered most the privation we had endured, and who had "strongly resist[ed] the idea of having to change...[our] original cultural habits" (Kim, p. 394), found the students sullen and unresponsive with a lackadaisical attitude towards assignments. As some of us taught in the same schools at the same time, it was not difficult to see that a teacher's attitude towards a culture had a massive affect on the learning environment of the students, and consequently their level of achievement.

In discussions that arose among ex-pat teachers in country after country, the consensus of opinion was that one of the most challenging of all aspects of teaching English to speakers of other languages, is that of accepting other cultures, their traditions, customs, and differences, as being equally valid to one's own. As Hall says, we need to "accept the fact that there are many roads to truth and no culture has a corner on the path or is better equipped than others to search for it" (1976, p.7). Only by doing so, not just intellectually but wholeheartedly, can we communicate respectfully and effectively with our students, thereby motivating them

to want to communicate with us, and in turn interact with our culture which cannot be divorced from our language. More personally, we do not feel comfortable in, or interacting with, a culture that we consider inferior to our own.

When we achieve this level of acceptance of the culture of the other, and incorporate this acceptance—even if need be, by adopting the cultural behavior of the other when necessary—into our dialogues with the other, we can consider ourselves competent in cross-cultural communication. Not expert, but competent—able to communicate with another without blatantly offending, or being offended by that other's culture.

In an attempt to be more comfortable with the culture of my students (whatever culture it may be), enhance my students' learning experience and become a better teacher, I knew I had to embrace the philosophy of equal but different, with my very being, not just with my thinking mind. I needed to put down my opinions and observe without judgment. To let go, as Zen Master Seung Sahn advised, the "I, my, me world" (1997, p.100) I had created around myself, and cultivate "Right[1] Thought [which] means not becoming attached to any views, not holding our opinion and condition and situation, and only keeping a before-thinking mind that spontaneously wants to help all beings" (1997, p.100), for five months, I wandered alone as a Zen journeywoman from Korea to Kathmandu via Sri Lanka and India, exploring the outer landscape while trying to tread mindfully and live according to the tenets of Zen Buddhism. The major part of this thesis, a travel memoir, is

[1] I am using 'Right' as this is the most widely disseminated translation from the Sanskrit of Sammaa, but it would perhaps be more true to the spirit of Zen Buddhism to use 'Skillful' as Gunaratna does (2001).

extracts from a narrative entitled *'From Korea to Kathmandu'* in which I describe this solo journey. By detailing how I maintained awareness that the mind constructs its own definitions, and showing how I paid attention to the fact that these descriptions are simply constructs without any intrinsic truth, (i.e. by keeping an everyday Zen mind), the narrative will show the personal growth in cross-cultural communicative competence that ensued. Reflective passages and contemplative questions have been added to each chapter of the narrative to help the ESOL teacher connect with the author's experience, and use it as a tool for their own growth.

I have chosen narrative as the genre for this thesis, since storytelling is the oldest form of knowledge transmission in all cultures, so it is a genre familiar and accessible to all. Support for its use in academia comes from many quarters. McCloskey (1990) proposes that there are two main ways that people comprehend a subject: metaphor and narrative. He further claims that different academic fields are already dominated by one field or another, for example physics by metaphor and biology by narrative (p. 5-22). Whereas metaphor represents the world symbolically, narrative immerses the reader in situations, contexts, and the problems of the characters in a way s/he can identify with, and from such identification make meaning from text. Bruner (1996) also supports the use of narrative as a way for an individual to understand unfamiliar topics. He suggests that in order to make meaning of material, an individual must engage in a dialogue with it, organize it in a satisfactory way for himself, and compare it with his own sense of what is conventional. He supports narrative as an essential tool in this process as he claims,

"Stories are the vehicles par excellence for entrenching [...] meaning-making into a more structured whole" (p. 102)

Because we live out narrative in our own lives, we more can better understand the lives of others when we encounter their narratives. As we read stories of the other, we engage in dialogue with the voices we hear; we make mental comments about the tales, the situations and the struggles based on the comparisons we make with our own. We see the similarities and differences between the life of the other and our own lives. When we interlace the new information we have received with our commentaries, and organize it in a way that makes sense of it to ourselves, we identify with the narrator in a way we never do when we merely read a list of facts about the other.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore diversity by giving voice to people from a number of different cultures, whom I encountered on my journey. By illuminating my experiences, the narrative will provide a source of reflection for the ESOL teacher on the path to cross-cultural communicative competence.

Audience

The primary audience is those considering, or in the process of, teaching English to speakers of other languages overseas, who need to understand both the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and reflect on ways to overcome this. A secondary audience is those who are teaching English as a second language in their own country, who need to understand how those from other cultures can be confused by cultural behavior that is the norm for the ESL teacher, so that they can take steps to help the learners adjust to such customs. I also envisage that another significant secondary

audience would be those who are running cultural orientation courses for potential ESOL teachers and/or American students seeking to undertake study abroad programs.

Rationale

With the explosion of the world-wide-web, and its meteoric rise in popularity all over the globe, the desire to learn English in order to take part in that new technological realm where 70% of the pages are written in English, has never been greater. Additionally, English has achieved primacy as the most widely spoken second language in the world, due to its use as a lingua franca among people who do not have a first language in common. Hence, the opportunities for native speakers of English to teach outside their own country have increased phenomenally. Furthermore, the rise in the numbers of people undertaking tertiary education in the English speaking developed countries, has led to a fall in the numbers of native English speakers available for service and agricultural jobs in these countries. There has therefore been an escalation in the number of non-native speakers of English becoming immigrants to English speaking countries in order to fill the available positions. They, and their children, in order to function in the cultures of their adopted countries need to learn English. This sharp rise in non-native speakers of English, has led to a shortage of ESOL teachers and enhanced packages from employers trying to attract suitably qualified candidates, especially in the USA (Zhao, 2002).

The increasing demand for ESOL teachers, both inside and outside of English speaking countries, has led to a boom in the number of people seeking to gain a

qualification in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, in much the same way that gaining an MBA was all the rage some ten years ago. In 2002, the American federal Office of English Language Acquisition (http://www.ed.gov/offices/OELA/index.html) had a budget of $665 million to ensure limited English proficiency students in the United States improved their skills. Many school districts specifically earmarked the funds they were given to help teachers gain ESOL licenses, (Zhao, 2002). Hence, it is often the case that teachers who undertake ESOL training are doing so because of school pressure and necessity rather than because of a personal interest in the subject. Equally worryingly, it is often because of a desire to travel and/or for the purpose of religious proselytization rather than through a desire to aid those trying to develop language competence. Even those who undertake training out of a genuine desire to facilitate language acquisition among non-native speakers of English, may not realize how important validation of the culture of the other is to effective language teaching; or if they are aware, lack the resources to aid them to do so.

It has therefore become imperative to foster cultural sensitivity and cross cultural communicative competence among those who seek to teach English to speakers of other languages, and to provide tools with which to do so to both those who train the potential teachers, and the teachers themselves.

In order to cultivate an atmosphere of multiculturalism and intercultural communicative competence in our ESOL classrooms, we must develop the ability to speak in the other's referential terminology -- be able to use the same linguistic terms -- and understand the underlying meaning behind the superficial structure --

ensure we know what concepts are being expressed. As Beamer says, (1992) "Intercultural Communicative competence is the ability to encode and decode meanings in matches that correspond to the meanings held in the other communicator's repository" (p. 294). This means we have to move both ourselves, and subsequently our students, away from ethnocentrism, which is defined as "philosophically believing that your culture provides you with a better sense of reality than other people's cultures do" (Bennett, 1996, p. 15) and towards ethnorelativism. This position states that "Cultural difference is neither good nor bad, it is just different" (Bennett, 1986, p. 46). From this ethnorelativistic perspective, we can adopt the philosophy that no culture is superior to any other nor "more central to reality than any other culture" (Bennett, 1986, p. 46).

Bennett is strongly influenced by Rorty's Pragmatic philosophy (1979, 1982) that states there is no Absolute truth; all truths are relative to the specific social environment of a particular person, time or place. Zen view concurs with this, and holds that it is our opinions that lead us to believe the perception of truth our culture holds at any given moment, is somehow 'right' and more central to reality in general, than any other culture's perception of truth at the same given moment. When we put down our opinions and see things just as they are, we will realize that nothing is ultimately good or bad.

Tremmel, in his book 'Zen and the Practice of Teaching English' (1999), has shown how the way of Zen can help one pay attention to the moment and become a better teacher. In addition, Mary Rose O'Reilly, in her 'Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice' (1998), demonstrates how mindfulness, which she

describes as "a dimension of contemplation, carried into the world" (p.9) , when it is practiced in our classrooms can help us "listen someone into existence, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish" (p.21). However, there is a dearth of literature dealing with how the practice of Zen can help one overcome one's cultural conditioning and avoid making judgmental cultural comparisons that immediately place one's own cultural perspective in a position of superiority over the other.

I undertook the journey detailed in the narrative, to see whether it was possible to walk mindfully in the world, and, by avoiding cultural judgments through the practice of Zen, develop a truly ethnorelativistic perspective. It was an introspective study made by recording the events of the journey, my reactions and reflections in a journal. I hope that the resultant narrative will have important implications for those interested in developing the richness of cross cultural experience. I offer the following three chapters taken from *From Korea to Kathmandu* for those who would like to share a portion of my experiences and insights, and make sense of them in the light of their own lives.

Each of the three chapters are set in different countries to demonstrate the universal applicability of the practice of Zen Buddhism. The first of the chapters, *Mindfulness In Hwa Gye Sa,* which is set in Korea, illustrates the tension between the ideals of the intellect and the reality of the actions of the body, and shows how the practice of Zen Buddhism can eliminate the gap between them. The second, *Opinions and Comparisons in Nilambe,* set in Sri Lanka, demonstrates the problems and frustrations caused by holding to one's own opinions, while judging the opinions

and customs of others as less than one's own. The practice of Zen Buddhism is shown to soothe and eliminate the aggravation that holding and judging causes us. The third, *Walking the Path: Camel Trekking in Rajisthan*, which takes place in India, demonstrates how maintaining awareness of things just as they are enables one to constantly challenge and overcome one's socially conditioned thought patterns, thus leading to the development of one's cross-cultural communicative competence.

Mindfulness in Hwa Gye Sa

Seven sets of underwear, t-shirt to sleep in, toiletries, massage oil, toothbrush, journal and pens. Satisfied I have everything I need, I zip my bag, lock the windows, pick up my trash and leave. Carefully locking the door, I walk along the landing and down the stairs. My landlord, who lives on the first floor is standing outside his door.

"An-nyong ha-se-yo," I greet him with a small bow.

"An-nyong ha-se-yo," he replies. Then, spotting my bag, he asks, "Where go you?"

"To the temple for meditation." I'm glad he has switched to speaking English. Despite my having lived in Korea for almost a year, my Korean is not very good.

"Cho-sum-ni-da." (good) "You come one week back?" His English is not very good either.

"Yes."

"Ok. An-nyong-hi Ga-se-yo." (Goodbye)

"An-nyong-hi Ga-ship-sio." I reply, adding the formality necessary for his age and therefore higher status to my words.

It's strange how used I have become to answering my landlord's questions, I think as I put my trash bag on the garbage pile outside the house and walk up the steep hill to the crowded main street, in Hae-Ban-Chon, Seoul. I bristled indignantly at his nosiness and his assumed right to know my business, when I first arrived to teach English. Now I'm more culturally clued in, I just accept that it is the landlord's role here to know all about my comings and goings. *But I'll never accept his*

'cultural' right to tell me what to do! I think fiercely. *I don't care if being female places me below him in the Confuscian hierarchy which this culture is built around. No man tells me what to do! I refuse to respect his culture that much.*

I walk past the church and weave my way through the early morning shoppers who crowd the narrow street, greeting and being greeted by the shopkeepers. It is from them that I have learned much of my Korean: numbers, weights and measures, vegetable vocabulary, oh, and how to say 'no meat'. Although I was taught by one of the secretaries at the British Council - the school where I teach English - how to say 'I am a vegetarian' on the first day I arrived, the concept is not well known here. It is much safer to be specific.

At the crossroads by the Police station, a cab is standing idle. I slide into the back seat.

"Itaewon?" The driver asks, naming the sleazy district that surrounds the Yongsan American Army Base located at the bottom of the hill on which I live. As several thousand of the 37,000 American soldiers stationed here in South Korea live, shop and play in Itaewon, it is not a terribly wild guess.

"A-ni yo. Hwa-gye sa, kam-sa-ham-ni-da," I say, refuting his suggestion and asking him to take me to the Hwa-gye temple where the Kwan Um International Zen Centre is located.

He nods, and starts the car. I lean back against the seat and, ignoring the all too familiar streets of Seoul that are much like city streets anywhere, muse on why I was about to become one of the laypeople who join the monks during their retreats of meditative silence, which they do twice a year for 3-month periods. Some people

were doing the full 90 days of the retreat, I was being a little more cautious and joining them for just one week this time. No point in overdoing it; I'd heard the schedule was horrendous.

I wanted to immerse myself in another way of being. I was losing the battle to let my beliefs guide my actions. It was three, maybe four weeks ago, that I had started to lose it. I'd been on the subway going to work, it was just another ordinary day.

As the subway train pulled into Kwang-hwa-mun, a station indistinguishable from any other subway station in the world except for the name, which is written first in Hangul then in smaller letters beneath in English, I slowly rose and inched my way towards the doors. I wondered for what must have been the millionth time why the Koreans moved so slowly. I gritted my teeth against the tunnel enhanced, slap-slap noise of shoes two sizes too big, which loosely encased shuffling feet. No matter how many times I told myself it was customary to wear overlarge shoes to ease the oft repeated process of slipping them off and on before entering or leaving restaurants and residences, I just wanted to yell the litany of my childhood:

"Pick your feet up! Now!"

My mother had always seemed to be shouting it at one or other of her five daughters. I smiled. I had obviously inherited more than her blue eyes.

Suddenly, a hand shoved me hard in the center of my back, sending me flying forward; I thrust through the subway car door like a champagne cork from a warm bottle. Stumbling, my hands echoed the initiating movement in a domino effect as my arms flew out to try to save myself from falling. Regaining my balance through

the 'ee-ows', and disapproving glances of those I had pushed and lurched against, I turned to glare at the culprit. Oblivious to his surroundings, now he had cleared the obstruction, the tall elderly man strode past me, his stride sure and confident.

All my carefully nurtured tolerance towards this chauvinistic, Confuscian culture evaporated in the swirling surge of anger that exploded through my fingertips into his arrogant back. He stumbled and turned back towards me, his mouth slack with surprise, his face purpling with indignation. I was a woman and younger than he; his unquestioned cultural hierarchy placed him high above me by right of gender, and his age placed him above both myself and younger others of his own gender. He could not have been more startled if a carrot had leapt from his plate and savaged him. My retaliatory push and red faced snarling of a year's worth of feminist frustration at him, was completely beyond his comprehension.

I was a sham. My intellectual beliefs that contradictory world-views can share harmonious co-existence, that difference is simply variation, neither intrinsically better nor worse than that which is familiar, had been exposed as a superficial cloak I wore. How different my attitude now to the placid acceptance of diversity that washed through my body with every breath I took during my Zen meditation.

It was so easy in the temple, or sitting on my cushion, to practice mindfulness: that impartial observation, that ability just to observe and see things without judgment, censure or denunciation. So easy to see things just the way they are with Zen Mind. I had to find a way to keep that mind with me in every situation.

As we drive over the speed bumps that are set into the entrance road to the temple, I am jolted back to the present. We drive slowly under the superbly

decorated slanted-roof - with curled up edges like day old sandwiches, which tops the huge red-painted pillars set into stylistically carved stone lions on either side of the road. This symbolic open gate marks the temple entrance. It's covered in geometrical patterns in brilliant primal colours fanning out from the central picture of a lotus flower, with skillfully painted flowers, birds, and animals sprinkled around the edges. Once through the gate, I can see the deep gorge cut into the rock along the left side of the road by the fast flowing river that runs through the temple grounds. The water running over the rocks makes a pretty, cheerful sound that welcomes me.

Water is an essential element in the placement of a temple to satisfy feng shui requirements. The temple is set on a hill, thus incorporating earth below it and air above it. All the candles that burn here day and night satisfy the fire requirement and the temple itself represents spirit, of which the four other elements are expressions. I find it interesting that nearly all mystical systems use the same four tokens ritually to evoke spirit. In orthodox Christianity, fire is represented by the candles--both those on the altar and the personal prayer candles that one lights, air by the wafting of the incense, holy water is essential for baptism, and earth shapes the human vessel into which God breathes spirit. Although many have additional requirements, these four are fundamental to all I have encountered.

The taxi passes through the metal gates that mark the start of the temple building compound and stops on the concrete semi-circle at the base of the half-dozen steps which lead up to the first level of temple buildings. The temple is built on the side of a hill, so its buildings are staggered on upward rising tiers. I pay the

driver, and walk up the flower-bordered steps to the first temple building on the left, where the International Zen Centre office is located.

Angie, the American born Korean returnee who does not feel comfortable in this land of her ancestors, nor in the land of her birth, is manning the office as she frequently does. She would love to be a monk, but is considered too unstable. She is calmer in the temple than she is anywhere else though, so her parents are happy to let her spend much of her time there; and the monks are happy for her help.

After I have completed the check-in forms, she gives me a copy of the retreat schedule and sends me up to the storeroom under the Dharma Hall to await the arrival of the monk assigned to housekeeping duties. There I will be issued with two sets of monk robes (gray baggy pants worn under a wide-sleeved, crossed-front, knee length, belted robe) and assigned a room. This is the last conversation I am supposed to have whilst I am here; strict silence is the rule during the retreat period.

While I wait for the monk to arrive, I look at the schedule Angie has given me and groan.

Daily schedule at the Hwa Gye Sa Summer retreat

3.15 a.m.	Wake Up
3.40 a.m.	108 Bows (*read 108 full prostrations*)
4.15-5.00 a.m.	Chanting
5.00 - 5.35 a.m.	Sitting (*read meditation*)
5.45 a.m.	Breakfast
6.30-7.10 a.m.	Work Period (*mindful working, a kind of focused meditation*)
7.15-7.45 a.m.	Tea Break

8.00 a.m.	Bow to Dae Soen Sa Nim Seung Sahn (*The Zen Master Seung Sahn*)
8.10-11.10 a.m	Sitting
11.15 a.m	Rice offering
11.30 a.m.	Lunch (followed by a break from 12 to 1.30)
1.30-4.30p.m.	Sitting
5.00 p.m.	Dinner
6.00-7.00	Chanting
7.10-8.50	Sitting
8.50-9.00	Two Chants and 4 great Vows
9.20	Sleep or Optional extra Practice

Well, I can tell you now that there will be no extra practice for me! With less than 6 hours allocated for sleep, I'm not going to spend my precious rest time doing extra bowing or meditation. Already my knees are complaining at the thought of all that sitting - you sit during chanting as well as while meditating. During yoga practice a couple of years ago, I'd forced myself into the lotus position - which has always been difficult for me - without properly stretching and warming my muscles first. I'd felt something 'give' and had experienced knee problems ever since.

After I collect my robes, one set for chanting and meditation, one set for less formal occasions, I am given my room number, and then sent for instruction, along with another entrant, to the head monk. He first shows us the proper way to bow to the Zen master and the senior monks at the start of Kong-an interview, then how to set out our bowls for the formal lunches and dinners that we will eat in the Dharma room with the monks. Breakfast will be taken in the dining hall with the other

laypeople, while the Zen monks eat with the monks of the Chogye Buddhist order to whom the temple belongs.

To my delight, I am roomed with Myong Oh. She is a well known artist in Poland and has a creativity which delights me. Her pad and paper, used for essential communication during this period of silence, is covered in tiny sketches and cartoons that cheer and sustain me when I thirst for outside input.

My first day is a bit of a blur, as I struggle to fit in with the routine beginning with the after lunch sitting. It is the longest meditation session I have ever tried. One hour has been my previous maximum. The three hours feels as if it will never end, and I only truly meditate for the first hour, after that it is just a tedious process of sitting still while a thousand thoughts run through my head in busy-mind syndrome. I move from prescribed activity to prescribed activity, confused about my role and wondering why I came. This straightjacket of a schedule may be immersing me in another way of being but I don't see how it will help me let my beliefs guide my actions. I am thankful to collapse into bed and relax my legs; although I can't get to sleep for a long time, 9.30 seems too early to sleep.

Morning begins at 3.15, a time I am more used to getting home from dancing than I am to getting out of my bed. Bowing at that hour of the morning seems like a chore at first, but soon it becomes a wonderful energizing way to start the day. I enter the rectangular Dharma hall at the top of the building, with its high ceiling slanting down to the windows that rise from the polished wooden floor to waist height, and stand behind my brown cushion. Silently the room fills with gray robed people, standing behind their cushions and waiting. At exactly 3.40, Mu-Shim

Sunim, the American monk who is the resident teacher leading the retreat, slaps his hand with the bamboo cane (chug-pi) to mark the start. 45 pairs of hands move, palms together in front of chests (hap-chang position). In unison we drop both knees onto the cushion, stretch out by sliding our hands along the cushion until our foreheads touch it, then our arms extend to their full length passing beyond our heads. Our palms turn upwards to signify that the self is less than the spirit that surrounds and unites us, then immediately the process is reversed until we are all standing again. There is no pause between bows. As soon as we are all standing, down we go again. It takes just 15 minutes to complete the 108 bows. Everyone moves concurrently: palms together, drop down, stretch out, raise hands, slide back, floor-palm push, rise up, repeat: monk aerobics! Only the physically infirm are allowed not to keep the pace and remain standing in hap-chang; the rest of us sweat it out.

We leave the room in silence, our heavy breathing adding substance to the hush. In a hurry to reach our rooms our slippered feet zip down the stairs in a not-quite run, our robes swishing from side to side. Even the more sedate and elderly among us move up a gear from their usual stately pace. There is a bare twenty minutes between the end of bowing and the beginning of chanting, and we must reach our rooms - women are mostly on the first floor, men on the ground - change from bowing robes into sitting robes, and get back to the fourth floor Dharma hall.

The bows on the robes have to be tied in a particular way, so they all look the same and are not floppy. A knot must be tied, a loop made, a double twist of the longest sash, another loop made and somehow threaded through the first loop, so

the robe is pulled tight and both loops are the same size and erect. I make a complete hash of it. My bow is uneven and droopy. I start again. Once more my bow turns out poorly. Chuckling at my third sweaty faced attempt, Myong Oh takes over and in an instant I am properly attired. Up the stairs we go, stop outside the Dharma Hall, reverse our direction so our shoes face away from the door – and the Buddha statue inside - and step out of them, leaving them neatly paired in the hall outside the door. We make it to our cushions just before the chanting starts.

Chanting transports me to a different space. One monk beats out the rhythm on a Muktar – a wooden globe with a triangular handle and a hole in the middle that resembles a fat fish – as the rest of us sound the chants. We chant in Korean and I understand none of the words. There are just sounds to make and sounds to harmonize with, and after one or two self-conscious moments, I just open my mouth and let it pour, not only not knowing what it sounds like but not caring; a total immersion in sound. I haven't sung outside a shower since I was a child, and it is like going to a very good concert, slipping deeply and easily into the music, and suddenly finding you are playing the lead violin beautifully. Initially I need to use a book with the words of the chants written in, but I soon memorize them. My favorite piece is the end of the 'Heart Sutra':

a-je	a-je	ba-ra-a-je	ba-ra-sung-a-je	mo-ji	sa-ba-ha
a-je	a-je	ba-ra-a-je	ba-ra-sung-a-je	mo-ji	sa-ba-ha
a-je	a-je	ba-ra-a-je	ba-ra-sung-a-je	mo-ji	sa-ba-ha
ma-ha		ban-ya	ba-ra-mil-ta		shim gyong.

The first three lines we chant at a fast 4/4 pace without pausing for breath in between the lines. Then the syllables in the last line are slowed and stretched out; each consecutive syllable following a down-up pattern that almost becomes singing.

I love the repetitive rhythm and the way my mouth opens and closes, forming and releasing the syllabic sounds. My head is like a ringing bell, resonating to the clapping of my tongue. I am the sound. There is no thought.

We finish with the Morning Bell Chant. While we chant, the huge temple bell in the grounds is beaten; the deep, echoing tones rise up to join our voices. We are one with the bell.

The notes fade away. Quietly we rise and reverse our positions. When we chant we face inwards, joined in breath sending resonance spiraling out into the world; when we meditate we face outwards, all part of the Universal One.

Euphoric from the exercise and the immersion in sound, I slide swiftly into the space between thoughts; caught in a bubble of no-mind for an exquisite protracted moment.

Breakfast is in the dining hall on the ground floor: rice, tofu-chili soup, boiled seaweed, and barley tea. It's vegetarian, as am I, but suddenly I'm no longer hungry. I give it a miss and drink cold water instead.

The shower feels wonderful against my skin. I can't believe I have been up for three hours and it is still not even six-thirty.

I am assigned to bathroom cleaning for my work duty. I would have liked to have been outside in the temple grounds raking the gravel in overlapping shell patterns, a repetitive moment of concentration that occupies the hands, the mind and the body. I don't think it will be quite so easy to stay immersed in the moment as I scrub the toilet and make the sink tiles shine. I try but my mind drifts off somewhere more pleasant as my hands clean automatically.

Tea break is a delightful surprise. I soon discover it is the one concession made to the fact that this is an International Zen Centre with monks and participants from all over the world. There are western foods laid out on a cloth in the Dharma hall: cake, bread, biscuits, nuts, raisins, prunes, cereal and fresh fruit. It is pleasant. By the end of the week, after the monotony of the temple food, I will consider it positively delicious. As I detest rice for breakfast, I often wait until tea break to eat. Koreans generally do not have a particularly varied diet, and they do not have separate breakfast, lunch and dinner foods. Rice and Kim Chi (pickle - fermented cabbage is the traditional one) are staples found at every meal. They are usually served with some kind of soup and at least one side dish. Whenever I teach food and meal vocabulary in my English classes, the Koreans are always quite surprised to find that Westerners eat different foods for breakfast, than they eat at other times of the day. After a week in the temple, I know why.

I have a long way to go before I can follow the two temple rules pertaining to mindful eating, and do not achieve the first more than momentarily. The second, I still have to attain. I love the sensual pleasure of good food.

1. *Accept what is served with gratitude. Do not cling to your likes and dislikes.*
2. *Do not seek satisfaction in eating. Eat only to support yourself in your practice.*

It is nice to sit companionably smiling and eating in silence with my fellow participants. The silence is developing, becoming palpable.

The tea-monitors clear the food and dishes away promptly, and everyone lines up around the walls to await the arrival of the Zen Master, Seung Sahn. A rustle of excitement flows around the room as he enters. My cynicism and dislike of hero

worship, especially the elevation and deification of men within religion, instantly flows to the surface of my mind at this veneration. He is a plump man of medium height, wearing huge square rimless glasses and, like all the monks, has a shaved head. He looks in his mid fifties, although I know he is almost 70. When he reaches his cushion, which faces the Buddha statue, we all line up in front of him. The most senior monks are in centre front, while the rest of us spread over three rows, the laypeople at the back. On command, we do a triple bow of respect, whilst Da Soen Sa Nim, stands looking bored. As soon as we are finished and standing again, he sinks in a single graceful movement to his cushion, gives us all a beaming smile and commands us to:

"Sit, sit!'

Three rows back, I stare at his face. His eyes catch mine and I am captivated. He glows. His eyes are luminous. They do not see through you, they merge with you. As he talks, I am drawn into his energy. It is gentle, kind and humorous. I don't hear what he says except for half a sentence.

"... only moment to moment: just do it!"

Ten minutes later, he jumps up as if he were 20 rather than almost 70 and rushes out the room, trailed by his attendant. He leaves the warmth of his presence behind him and there are many smiles to be seen as we all ready ourselves for the third meditation session of the day.

At first during the three-hour meditation sessions, my knees ache and then become painful, but after a while my tendons, ligaments and muscles relax into their new position. When they hurt, I stand for a while in hap-chang and continue my

meditation standing until the pain goes away. Every fifty minutes, at the sound of the chug-pi, we all rise and do a walking meditation around the hall. Eyes downcast, we walk with synchronized steps for 10 minutes, holding our meditative state until it is time to sink back to our cushions and continue seated meditation. There are periods when hours fly by and times when I feel every moment agonizingly slowly. Sometimes I am in so deep that when the chug-pi is hit to sound the end of the meditation period, I jump almost clear out of my skin. Other times I spend the last ten minutes of the session glancing at the clock willing time to hurry a little. This morning I do a little better than I did yesterday and drift in and out of the meditation. It is a clock-glancing-at-the-end session, but I emerge smiling and relaxed.

At the end of the long morning meditation session, one of the senior monks, Oh Jin, leaves the meditation hall ten minutes before the end to go to the kitchen. He takes a ceremonial bowl with him. We are on the fourth floor and the kitchen is on the ground floor. He returns with the bowl filled with rice and places it on the side altar next to the door. The meditation session ends with the thwack of the chug-pi, and the rice ceremony begins.

We all stand and turn towards the altar. He raises the bowl of rice above his head, offering it up to the world, and we chant a prayer of hope that all people will have food that day. The bowl is offered to the people in the ten directions, and we all say a line or two of prayer facing one cardinal direction, turn a quarter square, say another few lines, and turn again. We repeat this until we are back in our original position facing the altar. As Oh Jin places the bowl of rice on the altar, the chugpi is

struck again signalling the end of the ceremony. We leave the meditation hall and fetch the food and low tables up from the kitchen to prepare for our lunch.

Lunch and dinner are both formal meals, taken in silence with the rest of the 'sunims' (male and female monks) and laypeople doing the retreat. We eat as monks. We have four wooden bowls in graduated sizes set one inside the other, chopsticks and a spoon. They are all wrapped in a cloth that serves as a napkin. The preparation for the meal is to a set ritual, performed in unison. Once the food is arranged on a cloth in the centre of the hall and we each have a low table in front of our cushions, we sit and wait for the signal to start.

When we hear the chug-pi sound, we unwrap the bowls and lay them out. The smallest in the top left corner, then clockwise with the largest in the bottom left corner. We place our spoon and chopsticks neatly to the right of the bowls. Next, we cleanse the bowls with clean water, bought to each of us by the monk on serving duty in a kettle and poured into the largest bowl. We pour the water carefully from bowl to bowl then set the water to one side. Another monk rises and brings a bucket into which we pour this water. The water is set aside to feed the 'hungry ghosts': people who had been so greedy in their previous lives that they never had enough of anything and died still wanting more. They are destined to be reborn as hungry ghosts; beings always hungry, but with throats so narrow the only nourishment they can take is clean water. They congregate wherever people are, aching for what they have. The monks pour the water on the ground to feed them. It's a charming custom for a myth one wishes were true.

Next, huge containers of food are bought to each table by the monks on serving duty. Today we have rice, dried seaweed, which I love, kim chi (not the cabbage one thankfully, but sweet pickled daikon - Japanese radish), and tofu-chili soup. When we have all been served, we wait. When the head monk picks up his chopsticks, it is the signal to begin eating. When the head monk lays his chopsticks down, it is the end of the meal. Kindly, he eats at the pace of the slowest eater, his eyes watching the room to ensure all are replete before he gives the signal. My friends amongst the monks have told me stories of head monks at temples they have visited, who ate so fast that they had barely been able to take a couple of mouthfuls before the signal to finish was given.

We cleanse the bowls with hot barley tea; it's an acquired taste. One day I might acquire it. We pour the tea carefully from bowl to bowl and swirl it round each one, before pouring it into the next bowl. We then drink the tea along with any residue particles of food so that the bowls are left clean and ready to use again. I find this particularly revolting, so I learn very quickly to eat every scrap of food I put on my plate, and take very little tea.

After I help take the tables and lunch containers back to the kitchen, I wearily head back to my room. I set my alarm and nap for an hour. I have been up for almost 9 hours with another 9 to go and I slept only about four hours last night. I feel weary.

I wake refreshed and bounce up the stairs for the next long meditation session, only to be frowned at by the head monk. Bouncing is not properly dignified

behaviour for a monk, and I am supposed to be conducting myself as if I were one while I am here.

I sit unmoving on my cushion, right leg folded inwards, heel flat against my bottom, left leg laying flat touching and parallel to my right, enclosing it. The lotus position is too uncomfortable for me to maintain for long periods, so I use this 'Burmese' pose. I breathe slowly and evenly mind focused on my breath as it enters and leaves my nostrils; my belly pushes out and hollows in as I breathe from my centre; the place from which Chi emanates, about three fingers below my navel. My right fingers' lie on top of my left, thumbs of both hands curled around so the tips just touch and form a circle of my hands. They rest lightly on my belly, so the circle lies directly over the Chi-centre. Chi is the life-force energy that is in every living thing.

My head is slightly lowered, and my eyes are downcast. I stare at the patch of brown floor in front of me listening to the rustling of the monks' robes as they adjust positions around me. Slowly my eyes lose focus and I begin to drift into memory. Catching myself, I bring myself back to now. When I can no longer stay focused on my breath, I form a mantra in my head. *Om mani padmi hum.* I chant it over and over again; I vary the pitch and the rhythm until the sounds resonate and sing inside my head, taking me into no-thought harmony. The cough of the monk behind me enters and swells, its timbre harmonizes with the mantra, is joined by the bird song and fades as the rustling of my neighbour ceases.

Silence
Stretches
Embraces
Becoming

O n e

THWAK! My body jerks. I rise and stand in front of my cushion. A procession of gray-clad figures file past, moving anti-clockwise. The person in front of me moves as the end of the line reaches her. I follow her watching her feet. Her right leg moves and pulls mine forward too. My steps match her steps as she co-ordinates with the feet in front of her. Like a gray centipede, we circle the room; a right leg ripple precedes a left leg ripple. We are each mirrored in the other; no beginning nor end, just reflections of unity.

THWAK! We file back to our cushions and sink down to unmoving mind.

No-thing. A thought comes. *I'm not thinking, I'm in really deep.* I watch it. It passes. Silence returns.

I follow my breath.

I'm hungry. I wonder what we'll have for dinner tonight? I hope it's not tofu-chili soup again. Three times in one day is too much, even if I didn't eat this morning. Still I... I catch myself chasing the thoughts, marvel at where my mind has taken me from the one simple thought: '*I'm hungry*'. And I think, *Here I am expressing likes and dislikes...* I catch myself again. I breathe deeply and follow my breath. Feeling its gentle touch at my nostrils as I slowly inhale. Pause. Slowly exhale. Pause. Inhale again. Pause. Exhale. Silence returns.

THWAK! We rise again and follow the pattern formed. One or two drop out, disappearing through the doors and down to the bathroom. I stay immersed in the undulating wave of energy that circles the hall.

THWAK! We stop at our cushions. When the last person reaches theirs, we sink down again immersed in the space between thoughts, I am a passive observer of the thoughts that rise. They come and go. Come and go. They appear slower and slower. The floor in front of my eyes begins to undulate. I have lost focus. My eyes begin to weave a luminous pattern on the floor of the Dharma Hall. I am entranced by the dancing light motes that flicker like a hallucination in front of me. *It's so pretty! Look at the colours that have come. It's like that time in the garden...om mani padmi hum, om mani padmi hum.* I bring myself back to centre and blink my eyes so the floor returns to normal.

I hear the monk in charge of the meditation rise from his cushion and begin his rounds. He is carrying a flat cane. If you feel yourself distracted, or sleepy, you bend forward as he approaches. He will then slap your back between the spine and the shoulder blades. First one side, then the other. They say it stills the mind and drives away sleepiness. I lean forward and turn my head to the right. Carefully he positions the cane along the left side of my back; there is a moment of nothing as he raises the cane, then WAP! A jolt of energy and my back tingles. I turn my head to the left. He repeats the movement. I perform a seated bow and return to my meditation. I am curiously refreshed. I dive down into the stillness again.

THWAK! I jump. The end of the meditation is totally unexpected. I stand behind my cushion. I feel both dreamy and aware. The head monk leaves the room and slowly I follow. I am still immersed in that other awareness; the smell of another's soap touches me and curls around inside my nose, slowly dissipating. In the kitchen a pot clatters as dinner is prepared, it rings inside my head, echoing,

repeating. The monk in front of me seems to have a fringe of light, I watch as he moves. It is a bright white light flecked with colour, electric blue hums at his edge. My mouth tastes musty. My arms and legs feel as if they are made of cotton-candy. I am smiling.

I collect the small tables and carry them up the stairs. Place them in front of cushions and go back to the kitchen for more. They are all taken. I take up a kettle of water, it is heavy. One of the bigger monks passes me empty-handed. He smiles and takes the kettle from me. I smile back and continue, carrying nothing.

The dinner ritual is the same as lunch. I am still spaced. I don't notice what the food is.

After dinner, I change into my chanting robe. I still can't manage the bow. Myong Oh rescues me again.

I glide into chanting, notes float from my mouth; I can almost see the sound and I tingle with energy. I want to dance. I laugh at the thought and earn a frown from the head monk. The picture of me whirling around the room, gray robes flying as I twirl and dip drifts in and out of my mind. It is a persistent thought. I am bubbling with happiness and chant with the laughter that doesn't want to be still in my voice.

The chanting flows into the next sitting. I am drifting. My head falls forward, eyelids drooping. I sway, then jerk my head back to wakefulness. Weariness keeps stealing over me; sleep threatens to pull me down into the restful dark. I rock forward and back as I fight to stay awake in the warm stuffiness of the Korean summer night. I stifle my yawns chanting *Om mani padmi hum.* Suddenly, I find

myself awake again, head hanging, a pool of drool at the corner of my mouth. I pull myself upright. Guiltily aware that I have been sleeping I try hard to focus. I have no watch and am unaware of how long I have been dozing.

THWAK! We turn inwards and stand in hap-chang. At the next signal, we sink again to the cushions. The chants are slow and ponderous. The key deep and low. The male voices at the other end of the hall dominate. Then the chant rises. The deep male tones give way to the lighter female pitch. Now it is we who lead the hum. The voices ebb and flow; they come together, mingle, conjoin. A peaceful hush falls. The four great vows are given:

1. *Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.*
2. *Delusions are endless. We vow to cut through them all.*
3. *The teachings are infinite. We vow to learn them all.*
4. *The Buddha Way is inconceivable. We vow to attain it.*

The energy is calm and full. Replete I go to my room, collect my toothbrush, stand at the row of sinks in the collective bathroom, and clean my teeth. A gray robed woman on either side of me does the same. We spit in unison. We smile, sharing the mutual harmony and in silence return to our rooms. I cleanse and moisturize my face and am asleep as soon as my head touches the pillow.

The schedule that is in place at the temple sounds as if it is horrendous and wearying, but it is far from that. The schedule gives structure to the day; organizes life so that during the nine-plus hours of meditation a day, there is nothing to plan and no daily-life problems to attend to. Also it pulls your feet back to the ground as otherwise after a couple of days, you may well become lost deep in the land of the

inner self; the place of total union with the universe, where the universal and particular are one. I think that if I had stayed the full 90 days, I would never have returned to my normal daily life. For the first time I understand why people become monks.

I awake the next morning before the alarm. On my return from the bathroom, I encounter the monk whose duty it is to wake us, traversing the corridor ringing his bell with a steady insistent rhythm. We nod, it is too early for smiles. Myong Oh is still sleeping when I return to our room. I dress, but she sleeps on. Gently I shake her awake and pantomime the lateness of the hour by pointing to the clock, my clothes and a standing-still mime of running. She grins and shoos me away with her hands as she sits up, then rises from the mattress on the floor. In traditional Korean fashion, our mattresses are placed on rush mats (to prevent mildew) on the floor. My apartment is furnished in the same way so it is a custom I am used to.

This day passes in almost the same way as the previous one. During the afternoon sitting, the head monk announces the names of those who will go for Kong-an interviews. Mine will come the next day. A Kong-an, according to the temple notes, is "a paradoxical or irrational statement used by Zen teachers to cut through students' thinking and bring them to realization." I distract myself from my meditation wondering what the interviews are like. I have read some Kong-ans (Koan in Japanese) given by Zen masters, and the answers given by future Zen masters but all I have seen are word games. I have never seen the point.

By bedtime that evening, I am floating on currents of energy. Twice I have been silently chastised for running up the stairs, and once – horror of horrors – for

running across the Dharma hall. My legs don't want to be still. I give Myong-Oh a massage, grateful once again for the short aromatherapy massage course I'd taken several years before. I had discovered a hidden gift I'd been given, and always enjoyed sharing that with others. When I finish, Myong Oh is drifting into sleep but I am still energized. I go out into the hallway, there is no space in the tiny room we share, and do a yoga practice. Finally I am relaxed enough to sleep, but it is almost midnight. Only three and a half hours before I need to get up again.

I wake full of energy. I feel myself expanded out into the room, my spirit-energy cannot be contained inside its small body shell. Throughout the day, I keep feeling my energy bump into that of others. I feel so lit-up I want to look into a mirror to see if I am glowing. The silence which has surrounded me for days is alive; every small move a person makes echoes meaning through it, the lift of an eyebrow, the quirk of a mouth, a small hand gesture all convey meaning. A hunching inward of energy – withdrawal; a flash of anger or displeasure shoots from eyes, needing no sound to be heard; sadness leaks out, weaving pools of sorrow in the energy of non-speak; happiness floats up in bubbles, touching others in the shared space, tickling smiles to the surface, brightening the ambiance that surrounds us. There is no hiding feelings behind contradictory words, truthful communication prevails.

When I leave the Dharma hall to attend my Kong-an interview, I am filled with trepidation. I don't know what to expect, and I feel uneasy being challenged when I've not been able to prepare. When I reach the hallway outside the room where the interviews are being conducted, I sit on the cushion that is placed there and, as instructed, try to slip back into my meditation. But I am too nervous. My

head is filled with busy-thought: 'what ifs' and constructions of possible scenarios of the interview to come.

I enter the interview room and make my prostration to Mu-shim sunim. When I have finished I sit. I am scared. Silly though it is Mu-shim has always made me nervous. On the occasions we have met before, I have always felt his distance from me; we never seem to connect. I am scared of failing in front of this seemingly hostile person. That I am projecting my own fear of failure onto this man and seeing it reflected back at me as hostility, does not occur to me until later; all I know is he is my 'examiner' and I don't know what he wants from me.

He fixes his pale blue eyes on mine and surprises me by smiling and saying how nice it is that I have joined them here for part of the retreat.

"You're a teacher here aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where is it you work? This is not the usual school vacation time."

"The British Council. I teach adults. We run eight week courses, and we get a one week break in-between them; that's why I could come now."

I relax a bit. He seems pleasant enough. He senses me putting down the shield a little and moves in.

He points to the two objects that lay on the table between us and asks

"A cup and a pen: are they the same or different?"

I look at them, expecting a trick. I don't know what he wants me to say.

"Well, you use them both," I say looking at him carefully, "so in a way they are the same," I pause, not satisfied with my answer, "but a cup is just a cup and a pen is just a pen." I finish in a rush saying the words that pop into my mind.

"Good!" he exclaims. "Each one has its own job to do. Correct function."

Surprised I had got something right, I relax a little more. He begins to tell me a story of a Zen master who went to check on two monks who had been living alone but on the same mountain for one year. The Zen master had heard one man had gained enlightenment. He reached the first monk, who said nothing but held up one finger to the Zen master. He passed him by. He reached the second monk who did the same.

"'Ah, you have reached enlightenment', he said bowing before the second monk. How did he know which monk had reached enlightenment?"

I puzzle over his question, *how should I know?*

I hazard a guess. "Maybe, he held his finger differently."

Mu-Shim Sunim smiles. "No, everything was the same."

"I don't know," I say a little sulkily. I hate to admit my ignorance.

"Good!" He says surprising me. "Just keep 'don't-know' mind. A kong-an is a finger pointing to the moon. If you are attached to the finger, you can't perceive the moon. If you keep 'don't know' mind you take away your opinion. As Dae Soen Sa Nim says, 'When you take away your opinion, your mind is clear like space. Clear like space means only reflect action. Zen means correct conditional reflection. It means you respond to each situation correctly, meticulously. It means to understand your correct job in this moment. That means moment-to-moment correct relationship. If

you practice correctly, this moment-to-moment correct situation, correct function, correct relationship will appear by itself.' "

Suddenly I understand. There is no test, I just have to keep correct mind and look at the moon.

The interview whirls on. I say the first thing that appears in my mind in answer to his questions. I laugh a lot so does he. Some things I say are true reflections of our mind-to-mind; some are crazy words that fly in from nowhere. I have fun. There is no failure only arriving at a place we can see our actions more clearly. I leave the interview happy and without my fear of failure. *Just do it!* Who said that first, Dae Soen Sa Nim or Nike? I don't know. But they are both right.

Before I sleep, using energy focusing combined with massage, I help one of the more elderly monks with bad knees, who does her sitting practice on a chair but still suffers pain, to wash away the pain in her legs. I see/feel the 'stuck' energy like a stagnant dirty-brown pool; I touch no-mind and channel the energy that is all around through my fingers and into her knees. Together we visualize green light washing away the dirty brown. Her pain ebbs gently away. We have cleared the block, for now. I sleep well.

Day four. For the first time, I sit all through the sessions without needing to stand. My knees do not give me pain at all. Out of the blue during the afternoon meditation session, I find myself crying - not really knowing why. For two hours tears roll down my cheeks. Loss, cruelty, violence, self disgust, pain, anger: I name these tears; hard crystalline memories dissolve in streams mixing with snot, as I blubber and melt them away. In this weeping, I put down the pitiless psyche-

slashing pictures I have been holding; those destructive incidents of my life, remorselessly played over and over as if I could change them by repetition. A huge sigh which echoes around the Dharma Hall, follows a last hiccoughing sob; and I am empty, cleansed and whole. There is a moment of complete calm, before I am suffused with an ecstatic happiness that lasts for more than two weeks. Eventually, it will fade to leave me feeling happy and content. A quiet smile decorating my face instead of an idiot grin. But for now, I am euphoric. As we file out of the Dharma hall to fetch the dinner accoutrements, my elated beam fetches answering smiles and empathic pats on my shoulder and back. There are many there who have undergone similar cleansings.

My days pass. I am flying high. I am happy, smiling and shiny. It is easy to catch the opinions, comparisons and judgmental thoughts which pass through my mind, and turn them around. Each moment I am enveloped in an incandescent hug of energy; my guard is completely down for the first time since I was 12, I share my joy and there is no sorrow in my life. I walk in spirit in every waking moment.

Leaving the temple is hard. I feel excluded as I turn in my robes after lunch, while the others head off for their private quiet time. As I hand my robes back to the Hungarian born head monk, I break silence openly for the first time in a week.

"Thank you for helping me; sorry I kept running. My feet just wouldn't stay still!"

He smiles with real warmth. "You are making a bright shining. We enjoy it."

Touched, I ask him, "What do you miss most being here?"

He considers the question carefully. "Fruit cake. Not this Korean thing," he waves dismissively towards the outside of the temple, "but European fruit cake, with all the little fruits, soft and moist..." His voice trails off as he remembers.

"I will make you one." I promise.

It is strange to be on the outside with all the chattering voices around me. My voice seems small. I get out the taxi and stroll back through the market touched by the early afternoon sunlight. I put my bag in the apartment, check my e-mail messages, but leave the answers until later. I go out to the Jell deli, which stocks imported foodstuffs, to buy the ingredients for the cake I want to bake. My afternoon is spent mixing and baking an old-fashioned European fruit cake, rich with butter, sugar, eggs, dried fruit and love. I bake it in a roasting tin, so it will be big enough to share during morning tea break. The bottom is a little burnt, but I am sure they will not mind.

My evening is spent quietly, catching up on e-mail and reconnecting with the outside world. I drink a glass of wine, bought at an outrageous price from the imported goodie shop, and savor the cool light-fruit taste of Pinot Noir.

I wake from the most realistic erotic dream I have ever had, as my dream lover turns at the door of my bedroom to whisper "goodbye" softly. I am startled on waking as I recognize him as a fellow retreat participant with whom I have never spoken. I am even more spooked when I reach the temple just after lunch, holding the foil wrapped cake I have baked, and see him emerging from the temple kitchen with half a dozen others. They have just finished returning the tables and plates. He gives me a smile which turns my knees to jelly, walks directly up to me, squeezes my

arm and kisses me on the cheek. "Thank you," he whispers before he follows the others up the stairs. *It must be for the cake,* I think dazedly. *Surely he wasn't really there?*

Walking mindfully in spirit during my every waking moment had been easy in the temple. Despite the alien, highly rule-bound and disciplined culture, I'd immersed myself and accepted it totally. However, outside it was a different matter. The two years I spent in Korea, teaching, preparing lessons, and marking for forty hours a week, along with studying for a higher teaching qualification for another twenty hours a week, wore me down. I found that accepting a society that was alien to my female spirit, with its contempt for women in any capacity than that of the mother of sons, was incredibly hard. Despite my efforts to put down my opinions and not make comparisons, each day bought some conflict between what I thought was 'right' and my desire to accept the culture as equally as valid as my own. These conflicts left me struggling to focus on the spiritual, and trying desperately to avoid being so bogged down in the mundane that I could not see the spiritual within it.

Arrogantly, I had thought of myself as totally accepting of other cultures, but although I hadn't made detrimental judgments about Poland - or Hong Kong during the few short months I spent there - here I do. Although it is the most different society to my own I have lived in, I should not be so intolerant of it. I've found a lot of good things here, but I keep making cultural comparisons, this leads to judgments: judgments to prejudice. I cannot be as effective a teacher as I want to be if I am going to form prejudices about societies that I go to live in.

The disparity between my way of being when I am in a protected space and when I am not bothers me. I meditate on it a lot to try to find an answer. One day, I wake feeling totally clear and holding a vision of great clarity. When my contract in Korea is finished, I am going traveling—alone! I want to prove the fear-mongers wrong. Those who try to control women by controlling their freedom of movement, and the women who listen to them need different pictures painted for them than the ones the media portray. I will try to walk as mindfully in the world as I do when I am in the temple, accepting that everything is the way it is, without judgment.

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Meditation 1

Why is there a huge difference between the attitude of people living inside a temple, and the general attitude in the world outside?

With hindsight, the answer lies in the study of the culture of the temple. People with diverse backgrounds, situations and opinions gather to sit Zen. Different opinions lead to different actions thus causing different karma. Karma can be described as the law of cause and effect. Whatever action one takes now has a future result; the choice of present action is the result of a past cause. If each participant in the temple followed their own karma, chaos and disharmony would result. However, although each person enters the temple with strong preferences and aversions, by following the temple rules gradually these likes and dislikes are put

down. When everyone bows, chants, eats and acts together, all minds become like one mind. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says,

> It is like on the sea. When the wind comes, there are many waves. When the wind dies down, the waves become smaller. When the wind stops, the water becomes a mirror in which everything is reflected - mountains, trees, clouds. Our mind is the same. When we have many desires and many opinions, there are many big waves. But after we sit Zen and act together for some time, our opinions and desires disappear. The waves become smaller and smaller. Then our mind is like a clear mirror (Mitchell, 1976, p. 57).

However, outside the temple, people don't obey a single, set of rules. Each culture has its own rules and each person follows the rules s/he is attached to.

How then can Zen mind be kept out in the 'real' world?

Attachment is the key word here. If we are not attached to our opinions, situations and desires then our mind can reflect the minds of others we meet. We can attain the same mind as those around us by putting down our opinions and seeing the world just the way it is. "When your mind is clear like space...it is clear like a mirror. ...All things are reflected just as they are" (Seung Sahn, 1997, p. 310).

Spring comes, grass grows by itself.

The blue mountain does not move.

White clouds float back and forth.

(Seung Sahn, 1997, p. 310)

*Why shouldn't students put down **their** opinions, and step into the teacher's world? Surely it is the students' who must embrace the culture of the teacher, if they want to learn English properly?*

If we cannot ourselves, as teachers, learn to disengage and, by studying our thoughts, recognize how our opinions, descriptions of situations, and even many of

our likes and dislikes are shaped by the habits of our culture, then how are we to help our students overcome their own cultural conditioning sufficiently to connect with the culture expressed in our language? If students refuse to engage with the culture then they also fail to achieve a decent level of fluency in the language. If they find the culture bewildering enough, they may reject it--and consequently the language--completely.

Conversely, if we are living in the culture of the other, and allow ourselves to be disgusted by the culture which surrounds us, we may find ourselves rejecting the culture and therefore our students.

Zen Master Seung-Sahn, used the following anecdote to illustrate to a group of students how our culture shapes our thoughts, and consequently our opinions. He is talking about the Korean Buddhist temple custom of cleaning the food bowls with tea then drinking it, and one of his American Zen Student's reactions.

> One person from the Cambridge Zen Centre came to me very upset. 'I can't stand this way of eating! The tea gets full of garbage! I can't drink it!' I said to him, 'Do you know the Heart Sutra?' 'Yes.' 'Doesn't it say that things are neither tainted nor pure?' 'Yes.' 'Then why can't you drink the tea?' 'Because it's filthy!' (Laughter from the audience.) 'Why is it filthy? These crumbs are from the food that you already ate. If you think the tea is dirty, it is dirty. If you think it is clean, it is clean." He said, 'You're right. I will drink the tea' (Mitchell, 1976, p. 57).

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Reflective Task 1

The reflective task that follows is intended to help personalize one of the lessons from the narrative.

Within the narrative, (p. 24) I spoke about the general dietary habits of Koreans. Imagine yourself in a classroom with many Asian students. You are using an Elementary level textbook to teach different foods and you have your students do an exercise which asks them to put the names of different foods in the correct category: breakfast, lunch, dinner. It is a simple vocabulary recognition exercise, but as you wander around the class checking on where the groups have placed the foods, you find that many of them have placed *rice* and *soup* in all three columns. What assumptions might you make? Using Zen mind, what is happening? How do you deal with the situation now? How can you adapt the exercise for future use to avoid making students feel that their culture is wrong, if you mark their choice of which category to place such food items in as incorrect?

Opinions and Comparisons in Nilambe

Have I spent an hour or a lifetime on this bus? Standing with a hundred others, being crushed into barriers, feeling as if I were carrying the whole weight of the passengers on my arms as the bus sways towards my position, I suffer. All around me are the bodies and breath of others; I am invaded by the hum of a hundred mind voices. I say a mantra over and over to stay calm. *Om mani padme hum*, the stress ebbs with the mantra, as I struggle to stay in the calm space it makes for me. Finally, it's my stop; a nondescript place in the middle of a dusty road with forest one side, and a small shack selling basic groceries at the other. I disembark from the bus, no easy feat with my two packs. I place the big one on the ground, laughing at the sheer joy of my release from the bus. A kind man from the bus, who directs me to a narrow path running behind the small shop and up the steep hill to the meditation centre, watches me, concerned at my behaviour, as the bus pulls away.

Up and up and up I go, along the path that winds through the tea bushes walking steadily towards the meditation centre at the top of the hill. Although I moaned at the time, I'm thankful now for the training supplied by two years of living on the side of a hill in Korea. A Czech monk at Hwa Gye Sa, recommended the Nilambe meditation centre to me. He had stayed there whilst journeying through Asia studying the many different schools of Buddhism. The tea bushes scent the air with a sharp smell, like fresh pulled nettles that you can taste at the back of your throat. Overhanging trees provide welcome shade from time to time; at others, the sun beats on my body. Deflected from my face by the floppy brimmed white hat I am

wearing, it finds other places to creep in and get me. The backs of my hands and my wrists, which the shirt doesn't quite cover, take the brunt of it. I fear that if I stop to search for sun lotion, I will just stay where I am and never move again. There is no one but me on this seemingly endless dirt path. That people live and work on this hill is apparent only from the occasional glimpses I catch of small wooden shacks dotting the hillside, and the obvious cultivation of the regularly spaced rows of tea bushes that stretch upwards as far as the eye can see.

Up and up and up I go. Reverting to my pagan roots, I praise the Goddess when a sign: 'Nilambe 100 metres' appears. I grow expectant, but 10 more minutes pass before the summit and the meditation centre come into view. A debate rages in my head about the conflict between expectation and lack of fulfillment. It is better just to tread moment to moment and expect nothing. But that's hard to do when a sign just lied to me! *Why believe in signs*?...the debate continues.

I round the final bend in the road and emerge onto the gravel path that takes me up the final few hundred metres to the centre. It is a perfect peaceful spot. Too peaceful, I can't find anyone. I wander past the stone built, low roofed central building and peek in the windows. Inside the large square hall, around 20 people are sitting in meditation. It's not deserted, so all I have to do is find an office of some sort and book in. There are buildings on both sides. I choose right and peer through the open door of the adjoining building: a deserted kitchen. At the end of the kitchen is a small courtyard surrounded by a low stone wall. On the left, steps lead up through terraced gardens to the tree-line at the top of the hill. To the right, a few steps head down to a covered walkway over which pink and white roses and an

unfamiliar vine ramble. It leads to a small stone building. I go down. The door to the building is closed, but a handwritten sign saying 'office' is tacked to it. Thankful, I remove my rucksack, sit on the stone bench set beside the door and wait. From my vantage point I can see a hundred metres or so back down the hill I have so recently climbed, before my view ends at a line of trees which prevent me seeing further. It is about 85F and sunny with very little breeze. I stare down the hill at the trees, and let my mind drift into the unfamiliar birdsong that surrounds me; the only sound there is. Time passes.

I am hovering on the currents of the air, curved wingtips riffling gently. My mate is hunting far away; I am content to surf the thermal draughts and watch for prey to appear beneath my wings. The intrusive sound of approaching footsteps arouses me from my vision of flight. I detach myself from bird-mind and plummet back to the small wingless woman-body on the stone step below. A young man comes into view. I stand. He smiles, opens the door and enters. I follow.

"Hello," he says without curiosity, in German-accented English.

"Hello. I'd like to stay at the centre for a week or two."

"Ok. Please to fill in this form."

He picks up a book as I begin to fill out the form and starts to read, gently putting it down again as I ask a dozen questions about the cost, routine, and arrangements. I feel a little perturbed. He is very casual and offers no information I don't ask for. The charge is just under $3 per day including all meals, which are completely vegetarian.

"And the schedule?" I prompt him.

"It is posted outside the meditation hall, up there." He waves vaguely in the direction of the wall behind him. He must be a volunteer here at the centre, for he is completely lacking in customer service skills. *Ooh! Compared to whom? Who's being judgmental then?*

"I'll stay at least one week - maybe more. Shall I pay now or later?"

He smiles in that vague disconnected fashion that is already beginning to irritate me, "It is up to you. When you leave is fine, then how many days you are staying is known."

He reaches for a key from the board behind him, "Room seven. Women's rooms are past a meditation hall and through garden. Showers are down some more, past room."

He hands me the key and picks up his book once more. I strap my pack back on again. I am uneasy, I don't feel organized and in control. I give an inner shrug, try to shake off the uncomfortable feeling, and head towards the meditation hall. It is almost 3.30 and people are still inside the meditation hall. I find the posted schedule and copy it down carefully:

Schedule at Nilambe

4.45	*Wake Up*
5 – 6	*Meditation*
6	*Tea*
6.30-7.30	*Yoga*
7.30	*Breakfast*
8	*Shower*
8.30-9.30	*Working Meditation*
9.30-11	*Group Meditation*

11-12	*Outdoor Meditation*
12	*Lunch*
12.30-2.30	*Reading/Rest*
2.30-4.00	*Group Meditation*
4	*Tea*
4.30-5.30	*Yoga*
5.30-6.30	*Sunset Watch Meditation*
6.30-7.30	*Chanting followed by a meditation on a reading*
7.30	*Snack*
8-9	*Discussion*

There is to be no talking except at afternoon tea break, or to give instructions during yoga or work period. The morning yoga is mandatory, the afternoon session optional. Once a week, on Thursday, the centre mini-van goes into Kandy. Those that need to attend to personal business can sign up for the trip by putting their name on the list in the office.

Sounds good. I'm delighted that there is yoga twice a day and at least I don't have to get up too early. I love that there is a time set aside for a Sunset watch meditation.

I follow the path past a long low building labelled 'library' on one door and 'owners' residence' on the other. Through a very pretty garden with winding paths edged with purple orchids, pink rhododendrons, and yellow frangipani bushes with their delightful jasmine-like fragrance, I can see a low roofed stone building surrounded by a covered veranda. The doors on the veranda are all numbered. I find '7' and step inside. The room is quite primitive with bare, whitewashed walls and packed earth floors. On the wall facing the door, and on the one on the right, a stone ledge is covered with a thin straw-stuffed mattress. High above each one is a

long storage shelf, which I have to stand on the bed-ledge to reach. The only other furniture in the hut is a simple wooden table. There is no electricity, but candles and a box of matches have been thoughtfully placed on the table. I put my pack down and go out to look for the bathrooms. The showers are in a block with the toilets, cold water only and resident toads! Small lizards scuttle away as I enter. The shower cubicles have no windows, and bare stone walls, ceilings and floors; each one separated by a three-quarter height wall from the next. It is not going to be fun to attempt to shower in the dark, for I see no place where one could reasonably balance a candle without it getting wet and going out.

Back in my room, I unroll my sleeping bag and place it on top of the thin straw mattress. I test it, but it doesn't seem very comfortable, so I add the mattress from the other bed too. I take out my washbag, set it down next to my pack, light a stick of incense to dispel the slightly musty odour that lingers in the room, and walk across to the kitchen to join the rest of the group for tea.

I enter the kitchen feeling like a new girl at school. People are sitting on the cushion topped stone ledges that line the walls, and more are outside on the low walls that surround the courtyard. By the huge central cooking range, people are filling mugs from catering size kettles. I join them and pour myself a mug of tea. Oh dear, it has milk already added. I don't take milk in my tea. I sip it cautiously. Uggh. It has sugar in too. I look for somewhere to tip it, find a sink and pour it away. I see a tap marked 'drinking water' but I am afraid to try it, so rinse and fill my mug with iodine-doctored water from my pack. Although the notice has said talking is permitted at this point of the day, the people in the kitchen are sitting silently.

I wander outside. Some people are talking quietly others are sitting silent. I smile at those looking my way and find a space to sit. The people cover a wide range of ages, and nationalities. Some delicately boned, Sri Lankan boys in their late teens, all arms and legs, not yet grown into their height, have gathered together on one wall and are talking in urgent whispers with each other. A big boned blond couple in their twenties, both with dreadlocks hanging halfway down their backs, are sitting cross-legged on the floor laughing and talking animatedly together. He has an amazingly bushy beard. They are dressed in combat fatigues and have New Zealand accents. Sitting on the wall next to me is a slender dark haired British woman in her early thirties. She's dressed in a Punjabi suit – more properly known as a salwar chemise: baggy trousers caught up at the ankles, worn under a knee length overshirt cum dress – of the style favored in the North of India. She is talking animatedly with a rotund blonde American woman in her middle years, who is wearing a long flowing beaded cotton skirt, cheesecloth blouse and long waistcoat. 1975 style revisited. I catch a snippet of their intriguing conversation.

"...you know, those people of the sort who wander around the town saying things like, 'it is so spiritual here, even the beggars are holy.' They have no idea of what Daramsala is really like."

Daramsala is the town in the Northern state of Himashal Pradesh, India where the Indian Government kindly allowed the Dalai Lama (the Head of State and Spiritual Leader of Tibet) and his government in exile, to set up their headquarters. They granted him political asylum when he fled from Tibet in 1959 after the Chinese brutally suppressed a massive uprising there, nine years after they had invaded.

Since then, the Dalai Lama has resided there, between his visits to other countries trying to find a peaceful way to persuade the Chinese to give back the country they have annexed. Although a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and revered throughout the world, he describes himself as a simple Buddhist monk. I want to go to Daramsala. What are these people talking about? I want to know more. Disappointingly, they change the subject and begin talking about yoga retreats in Pune, India. A place I also plan to visit. I make a mental note to talk to these people in a day or two. I feel shy about approaching them now.

Back in the kitchen, where I go to rinse my cup, there is a striking looking Buddhist monk. He is six feet tall and ramrod straight. He has gleaming skin the colour of polished mahogany, and sharply defined muscles on his arms and shoulders. The traditional saffron and maroon, off the shoulder robe he wears compliments his skin and emphasizes his muscular frame. He has classically beautiful features and liquid eyes. I feel guilty about noticing him as a man, but he is hot! To distract my thoughts, I turn my attention to the group of five or six young Sri Lankan girls sitting silently at the side of the room. They smile shyly at me, then blush and look away as I smile back. They are dressed in blue jeans and long sleeved blouses. Two more young Western men sit and nurse cups of tea, wrapped in their own aloneness, and one huge bearded mountain man who could be any age between 40 and 60 is sitting opposite the door. A bird-thin elderly white woman is just disappearing through a door at the other end of the kitchen. Her skin is so translucent and her frame so light, she looks as if the slightest breeze would carry her away like a dandelion seed. There is one more woman, a Sri Lankan, rinsing her cup

at the sink. She is in her early fifties and wearing a sari. She holds herself lop-sidedly, favouring her right leg as she walks away from the sink.

I follow those of the group who are going to the afternoon yoga into the mediation hall. To become connected with this group, I need to feel their energy. Yoga practice is a good way to start. The meditation hall is lovely. A large square room, with carpeted stone ledges, carpeted floor, small windows which line the walls on both sides, and a huge pile of cushions to sit on. A pile of yoga mats is at the far end of the room. I take one and placing myself at the back of the hall, begin a few warm up poses. One of the silent Western men takes the class. He leads us in some very basic poses, but does not help the young Sri Lankans who are obviously new to yoga to form the right positions. He does not mention pranayama - breath control: the basis of yoga. I help the two girls nearest to me to correct their poses; I am scared they will twist a muscle if they continue with their bodies in the wrong alignment.

After the yoga class, I climb to the top of the hill and walk along the ridge until I come to a slope leading down to a small lake. Up close, the water is very clear. Small fish swim hurriedly away as I remove my boots and paddle at the edge of the water from a place where there are no reeds. It is cool and soothing. My feet stir up little clouds of mud that swirl outwards and hide my toes from sight. I stand still and locate the sun. It is behind me. Reluctantly, I replace my boots and walk to the far side of the lake so I can face west and watch the sunset. I find a patch of grass that looks comfortable and, removing my boots once more, sit cross legged to watch the sun go down. I slow my breathing and empty my mind, my eyes raised towards the

sky instead of turning them down towards the ground as I normally do. Today there are no clouds in the sky to diffuse the light, as there was when I watched the sun set over the sea in Colombo. The sky spins through the hues of red, in block after block; each single colour yielding to the next. No polychromatic bands appear; today monochromatic solidarity is the theme of Apollo's dusky descent. I am at one with the Greeks of yesteryear who raised Apollo above the other gods, second only to Zeus, father of all.

I sit unmoving in the Burmese pose, one leg enclosing the other, hands circling the Chi-centre, my breathing slow and even.

I am deep in the stillness that lies between thoughts, senses heightened so the smallest sound echoes like bells in my head; the rustling of the leaves in the wind, the croak of the frogs, the swishing of the grass as a small creature pushes its way through it, the birdsong repeating over and over, all combine to play like an orchestra in my head. The scent of jasmine on the air mingles with the faint smell of leaf mold from the wood; the wind changes slightly bringing a whiff of wood smoke and stagnant water to join the jasmine-leaf smell. I sit quiescent until the crepuscular light fades to blackness, and the first stars appear.

The night temperature has dropped and a chill runs through me. I shiver and stiffly rise. The moon is a thin sliver. In the first days of its first quarter, it is not yet bright enough to light my path unaided. I pull my small flashlight from my pack and shining it on the ground in front of me, make my way back to the centre. All is still. I reach for my small clock and realize I have missed the start of the evening chanting. Later in my stay, I will not hesitate to enter the hall late; now, still mentally bound by

the rules of the temple in Korea, it is unthinkable to interrupt the group. I walk back to my room. It has been a long, long day. Despite the early hour - it is only 7.15 - I have been up since before dawn, I clean my teeth perfunctorily, set the alarm on my small clock, and climb into my sleeping bag. I sleep deeply.

Day two is my difficult day. The whole day swirls into one long irritant where nothing is right and I hate everything.. I wake before my alarm and clean my teeth in the dark. I have not showered since early yesterday morning when I left the 'Little Dream' guest house, and still feel gritty from my travelling, but it can wait until the later scheduled time. There might be 'things' lurking in those showers. I make my way to the meditation hall. The meditation is difficult as people are not still. They get up and walk around whenever they feel like it, they sway and rock and cough; each person is in her own individual space without any group focus. The huge mountain-man is the worse. He rocks back and forth, snapping his head from side-to-side as he does so. I am aware of every sound and movement. I cannot enter my personal space, too many people are rattling around and disturbing me. I am disgruntled. Tea is still sweet and milky I drink water again and wait for the yoga class to begin. Yoga is good, simple moves but the atmosphere is better than in the meditation. I sink into the energy as I occupy my body by stretching. Breakfast is nasty! A gluey substance with a slightly lumpy texture I hate. Bananas and dried figs stand in bowls at the side. They're not my favourite fruit, but I'm hungry so I fill up on those. The tea is brewed in big kettles with the milk and sugar already added. It's vile! I always drink my tea black. I hope dinner is better. My body desires are strong today, I am critical of the food, the energy and the people. Dinner is a simple,

but tasty, vegetable curry with boiled rice. However, it's taken casually from the giant pots and eaten alone. Will I ever get used to those people moving around in the meditation hall? Where is their self-discipline? Can't they just sit still? Every rustle and movement they make resounds through my head pulling me up from the centre, taking me away from home. My sunset watching meditation is interrupted by two people wandering right in front of me, talking! Didn't they pay attention? No talking except at tea-time. I am cross, hate the cold shower, the discussion is boring and I have made a mistake. I should not have come. This is not the kind of spirituality I am used to, everyone doing their own thing in contradiction of the others around them. All should be doing the same thing in gentle harmony.

Oh prescriptive me! Where do these thoughts come from? I, who have always advocated freedom of movement and spirit, and believe there is no absolute right or wrong way to do anything. Context, custom and place are the arbiters of what is correct for each situation, yet I am criticising this place because it is different to other places I have been. Why? I meditate by myself in my hut before I sleep. No answer appears and my sleep is dreamless and deep.

Day three. The movement of others in this morning's meditation class doesn't disturb me so much and the yoga wakes my whole body up. Breakfast this morning is excellent, if an unfamiliar mix. We have white beans, coconut, banana and avocado. I feel refreshed. Today, the only thing that disturbs me is my encounter with a leech on the way to the shower. I feel a tiny irritation on my foot, look down and there it is. a slug-like creature sitting on my foot sucking at me. It's really nasty! I just want to get it off me! I am repulsed and nauseated at the feel of it as I reach down and

peel it off my skin. All the instructions of how to get rid of one, to make sure the head is properly removed, have disappeared. It has to go, now, this instant! I throw it as hard as I can away from me. It must have injected an anticoagulant into the skin, for five minutes later my foot is still bleeding as I sit cross-legged on a bench, writing my journal. My feet are pulled away from the grass where those nasty things lurk, thin and skinny like worms waving their blind heads towards the warmth of my feet, my blood. Yuck!

Where is the spirit that reveres all creatures, which refuses to kill mosquitoes because they have a right to live too? Gone, in the instant of seeing this engorged creature fat on my blood sitting on my foot. I am still revolted by the experience.

No-one shows up to lead the evening yoga session. The young Sri Lankans huddle in a corner, some people leave. I face the back of the hall and begin my own routine. Several minutes later, while I hold the crab position (feet and hands on the floor, back arched, belly towards the ceiling, face pointing forward), there is a small cough at the side of me. I open my eyes one of the shy Sri Lankan girls I have been helping with her poses for the past couple of days is standing by me waiting to speak. I lower my body to the floor.

"Yes?" I smile up at her.

She looks worried. "Are you going to teach yoga tonight?"

I am startled. "No!'

Her face falls. "Oh, I thought...you help us...you might..." her voice trails off.

I look around there are six or seven young boys and girls milling around looking at us. I realize she has been pushed forward to ask. "Well, I could, if you like."

They beam. They get their mats and arrange themselves in front of me. I am teaching the yoga class. As I demonstrate the poses, correct poor posture and ensure they are breathing in the right way, more people drift in. Suddenly, I find I am teaching a dozen people. I hope I don't do it wrong. I have watched these people, some of them are pretty good. I have been practicing for several years, but I have never taught it before. I forget to be self conscious as I notice that most of them are breathing shallowly through their chests. I stop, turn sideways and demonstrate Tangen breathing. Breathing that is centred in the stomach, so that the belly goes in and out like a small baby's. I watch everyone still their chests and extrude their stomachs. I walk round checking everyone has a pot-belly. The sexy monk is there too, conscientiously keeping the rhythm of pot and hollow, pot and hollow. I smile. I am enjoying myself. We all stand on one leg, palms touching in front of our chests in a prayer pose, and breathe slowly. We are united in breath.

Evening meditation follows, after a short reading on the Buddha's enlightenment under a banyan tree - or bodhi tree as it is often known. I sit on my cushion, breathe and let go of the comparisons and criticism. For what good is it to compare an oak tree with a bamboo? They both have different jobs to do, and criticising either for not being the other is fruitless, and not constructive. I stop fussing at being unable to control what is happening around me, and change my way

of meditating slightly. Finally, I manage to come to peace with the other energies surrounding me. I compose this poem in my head.

Rush Hour at Nilambe

Settling, adjusting, slowly calming
Silent Breath, eyes downcast
Sliding into space between thought
Peace comes.

Restless rustling, the whisper of feet
Gliding into view a slowly moving foot
It hovers, poised, in the space where eyes rest
Reluctantly, disturbed, I can see them
Bodies waver past

Five, six, seven, silent striders
Fill the empty space between
Where are they walking in their heads?
Feet in my space, what to do?
I close my eyes, smiling
Peace comes.

I sink into the arms of the purple-lit inner space that caresses like silk and velvet, enfolding my mind in love, and quieting its anxious, restless narrative. I go home again to Being.

We are led in our discussion tonight by a monk from Thailand who has come to join us for a while. Our discussion is about comparisons – synchronicity strikes again. How we use them to alienate others and create groups to which we belong. In the separation between 'us' and 'them' we create the Other, the alien, the enemy. The hierarchies and divisions that drive this world are laid open to the exposure of our words. We chew them up and spit them out, devastate the divisions with our words and the men still try to overtalk the women. Worse, some women let them, falling silent as the men interject their 'important' thoughts. Joanne, the American

woman who had spoken about Daramsala, continues to speak right over the top of the monk who tries to interrupt her. *You go girl! Show him what to do with his hierarchy.* There! I have created my own 'us' and 'the others'. But it is not of my creation. I was born into this battle. *Then it is up to you to lay down the weapons and find another way*, my mind voice reminds me. *Tomorrow - maybe*, I respond.

I walk back to my hut by the light of a candle set in a plastic water bottle. The top has been cut off the bottle, rough holes punched in the sides and string threaded through and knotted to make a handle. One side is cut lower than the other, so you can reach in and light the candle, but the flame is shielded by the higher side. Each new candle is melted a little on the bottom to enable it to stand upright, as its newly melted wax, joins with the wax of older candles. Sri Lankan recycling is instantly practical.

Nighttime by candlelight is magic: Fireflies dance to a beat of star-driven drummers. Flicking in and out of existence like potential mesons. Truly understanding of how something isn't until it is: being and nothingness – no becoming. Stars light the sky so clear and pure. No electricity: that artificial light that reaches for the heavens hungry to join it and failing, falls back to obscure the view. Reality pure and whole.

Days go by, passing from one to the other as I dream them. I am smiling all the time, and walking relaxed. My body is untwisted, I have felt my spine uncurl and my shoulders drop like the unfolding of a new fern leaf. My feet are planted in the earth, my head reaches up, being pulled into the sky. I am light, dancing through the day like those helicopter seeds that twirl though the air on spiralling wings.

No new teacher has come, so I am still teaching the yoga lessons. I share what I know, but am aware of my need to learn more. Maybe I can go on a yoga retreat. I decide to teach them how to stand on their heads. First I demonstrate how to do it unsupported, then I have them pair up to catch each other's legs and prevent their partner from falling. I walk around correcting posture. The monk, still wearing his robes as he does for every yoga practice, kneels and catches his robe between his knees and his calves, locks his hands together cupping his head and, placing his arms in the supporting triangle, begins to rise. His legs rise firm and straight initially, but then they wobble and he begins to overbalance. His partner is distracted and looking across the room at his friend. I reach out and catch his legs. He goes rigid, a stinging shock passes through my hands, and he lowers himself to the ground and stares straight into my eyes. Naked sexual desire glows momentarily in his eyes, but is swiftly replaced by a fearsome glower. I'm stunned by the physical shock of his energy discharge - like receiving a major blast of static electricity - and at the sexual awareness that passed between us as I touched him.

I apologise and hurriedly move away. I have committed a major cultural faux pas. Women and Buddhist monks do not touch in this part of the world; the monks practice celibacy and the touch of a woman is a temptation away from their spiritual path. Only practitioners of Tantric Buddhism, which uses sexual coupling and orgasm as a way to transcend the self and fuse with the unity of the One that underlies our reality, are exceptions to this rule. Tantric Buddhism is a rare practice nowadays, very much out of favour in the modern Buddhist sects. I continue teaching, but the lust I feel towards this monk appalls me. After my initial

acknowledgement of my attraction to him in the kitchen on the first day, I have been sublimating my desire; as if labeling it 'taboo' and refusing to dwell on it would make it disappear. It is just as shocking to me that he too felt the lust, however briefly.

The monk is still on my mind during the morning work detail. I'm assigned to my favorite task: sorting the rice. I tip the rice for the coming meal into a huge colander and pick it over, removing husks and small stones; the little white ones are the most deceptive. They lay hiding among the rice grains, almost the same colour, trying to mingle so they can leap out and break the teeth of the unwary rice eater later. But I am vigilant, there is no hiding place. Every last stone is rooted out. *Find the desire, own it - don't hide it, then you can put it down.*

By afternoon tea-break, the monk has forgiven me for creating the tension by my non-observance of the cultural norms here, smiling naturally at me and talking about the possibility of me teaching English to the monks at his temple. I take his details and tell him I will contact him if I return to work here next year. I like to do voluntary teaching as well as paid teaching when I can arrange it. A little giving back keeps the flow of energy constant. He is happy with the Tangen breathing I have taught them, and says he uses it for his meditation now. I am happy I have bought a little bit of Korean Zen Buddhist practice to this stronghold of Theravada Buddism; a blurring of the boundaries.

Conscious that I am deliberately moving away from him, I turn to talk to the older Sri Lankan woman. She comes every year for a retreat here, and tells me that the bird-woman I saw leaving the kitchen on the first day I arrived here, but have never seen clearly, and the mountain man who rocks back and forth during

meditation practice, are an American mother and son. They live here year round, with trips back to America once a year when they need to renew their visas. They never talk to each other apparently, and she never sits in meditation with the rest of us. He walks like a captive bear, swinging his head from side to side, and she flits around the centre like a ghost. They're a strange pair.

As the moon waxes fatter, I feel my time here becoming short. So, one evening before bed, I break the rules and speak with Pam, the British woman I overheard speaking about Daramsala on my first day here. She has travelled all over India, going backwards and forwards for the last year. She's been travelling from ashram to ashram (a religious or spiritual retreat, where one usually goes to mediate and lead a simple reflective life for a while), in search of spiritual truth, and has a wide knowledge of many different spiritual practices. As a visa to India only lasts for six months, before you must leave and obtain a new visa, she is here on a trip to gain a new visa.

"I love the clothes you wear, they are pretty and look really comfortable." I say, admiring her salwar-chemise.

"They stop you getting stared at quite so much too. You will see. Even when you wear an ankle length skirt and long sleeve blouse, so you are more covered than their women, the men still ogle you and press themselves up against you. Wearing these clothes seems to place a barrier of respect between your gender and their lust. It is what they are used to. The women feel more comfortable too. Have you noticed how hard it is to get the women here to have conversations with you?"

"Well, until I started teaching the yoga, yes. Outside, the men were happy to speak, but only the guest house woman really spoke to me."

"It's worse in India. Dressed like that," she gestures to my baggy t-shirt and sweat pants, "you are seen as a temptress out to get their men. In the cities, they blame you – the western women – for the decline of morals amongst their youngsters who wear ever more revealing western clothes. And in the rural areas, you are seen as untouchable, like prostitutes."

"Where did you buy the outfits?"

"In Delhi. You can get them made in a couple of hours. You're going to Delhi first, right?"

"Yes, just for a couple of days."

"Flight to Chennai, then train? Or bus?"

"I'm flying into Delhi from here. Well, you know--Colombo."

"Lucky you! Well, take the bus from right outside the Airport to the railway station. Ignore the taxi drivers; the bus takes you door to door in about 40 minutes. There's a bazaar with loads of shops, tailors, restaurants and hotels, right opposite the International entrance to the railway station. You can easily get a couple of Punjabi suits made up there.

Have you got a chain?"

At my look of puzzlement, she pulls out a length of sturdy metal chain, as thick as a Doberman's leash, and twice as long as her rucksack.

"One of these, you can get one from any hardware store – get it here it's cheaper than by the railway station in Delhi – then you can chain your rucksack up.

Essential on trains and buses or you'll never be able to go to the loo or get a cup of tea without lugging it with you. And get your own metal cup. You won't want to drink out of some of the crockery you're offered, and you can get one of these little things too and boil your own water – much nicer than iodine flavored water. Great for making tea too. "

She reaches into her pack, and shows me a small metal rod which ends in a triple coiled loop of metal at one end, and is embedded into a plastic top to which an electricity cable and plug is attached at the other. It fits directly into the cup and the whole thing acts as a personal kettle. Neat!

The moon is almost full. I want to go to the Full Moon festival in Kandy before I head onto Delhi. Pam has given me a list of ashrams to stay at, if I want to, and some useful advice. Several more pieces of the travel puzzle completed, and I've picked up a key to the next level: no comparisons. It is time to move on.

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Meditation 2

Why was I so critical during my first few days in Nilambe? What was it about my situation which made me so uncomfortable?

My own opinions and the comparisons I made. I was expecting one culture to be the same as another because they had certain common practices, and when they were not I labeled one good, and one bad. I had become attached to the idea that a

meditation retreat should be conducted in a certain way, and because there was a difference between my expectation and reality, I clung to the idea that the 'different one' was wrong. I was not practicing Right Thought but exercising prejudice.

What is appropriate touch? Is it that which is permissible in my culture, or is it that which is permissible in the culture of the other?

Pushing me out of the way, as the old man did in the subway station in Korea, was perfectly acceptable behavior in his culture - yet it constituted assault in mine. Catching the leg of a man in a yoga class to prevent him from falling, is not only appropriate but expected in my culture. However, it is perceived as sexual harassment when the man is a monk, and the culture is Sri Lankan.

Only by clinging to our own opinions and sense of righteousness, can we say that our culture's definitions of what is appropriate, is more valid than any other definition. By keeping Zen mind and seeing things just as they are without coloring them with our opinions, we will practice Skillful or Right Effort--one of the eight steps on the Buddhist path--to overcome negative mind and cultivate and maintain positive mind. The Right Thought that ensues removes us from the idea of there only being one right answer. This in turn will enable us to behave with cultural appropriateness without inner struggle.

How can practicing Right Effort to maintain Right Thought and knowing that 'appropriate touch' varies from culture to culture help the teacher in an ESOL classroom?

By knowing there are differences, the teacher in a multi-lingual classroom can open up the subject for discussion and by doing so, both expand her students'

knowledge of the culture within which they live, and their ability to recognize that there is a multiplicity of norms dictated by cultures. None of which is any more "central to reality" (Bennett, 1986, p. 46) than any other. In a monolingual classroom, it would behoove the teacher to learn what is appropriate within the culture she is teaching so she may avoid being unintentionally disrespectful by, for example, touching the head of a Buddhist.

Furthermore, extrapolating empirical evidence to the unseen may cause confusion and offence. I.e. if one is walking down the street in Nepal, and sees boys holding hands, or girls with their arms around each others' waists, one may perhaps be forgiven for wondering why the local population frowns disapprovingly when one holds the hand of one's spouse. Just because same gender touching is appropriate, it is no indication that cross gender touch is also acceptable. Seeing things just as they are will give clarity, however.

As rules of appropriate touch may also apply to the way one touches inanimate objects--for example it is disrespectful to give or receive money or important documents (including graded papers) in Korea with one hand--pitfalls are everywhere.

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Reflective Task 2

The reflective task that follows is intended to help personalize one of the situations in the narrative.

Within the narrative, (p. 62) I spoke about the appropriateness of cross-gender touching. Imagine you are in a classroom and you have divided the class into pairs that are gender and ability balanced. You require the students to share one text book between each pair, to promote close collaboration on the exercise. However, although some of the pairs are working well together, you find that in some pair-groupings, the text books are in front of the boys--who are talking across pairs to other boys--while the girls sit silently alone, away from their partners, with no access to the books. What might be happening? How can you check whether your assumptions are correct? What solutions can you think of that will involve all of the class? Should you follow the patterns of the culture of the participants? Alternatively, should you expect the participants to follow the pattern of the culture that accompanies the language they are learning? If so, how can you make it easier for them to do this?

Walking the Path: Camel Trekking in Rajisthan

Today I'm on a mission to hunt for the best camel trek company I can find. After my morning rooftop ritual and a shower, I run easily down the steep narrow stairs and out into the maze of winding streets to begin my search. Every time I see a notice for Camel safaris, I stop and check out prices and terms. They are generally offered for groups of four upwards. To go alone is costly, and the organizers try to discourage me from doing so, but I am wary of being attached to a group of people I don't know. All morning two girls dog my footsteps; as I leave one agent, they enter. A few enquiries later, the same thing happens again. The third time we meet is in a café where I have stopped for a fresh lime-soda. Sandra and Susan are plump, blonde, British girls, in their late twenties, who work together in a local government office in Leicester. They have taken three weeks vacation to come here, a place that one of their co-workers had visited the previous year. As they coo over my clothes and romanticize my traveling-teacher life, it occurs to me that they may be the companions I need to make up a trekking group. But I am hesitant. I want my desert sojourn to be a silent one; to be a time of introspection away from people noise, and they are so full of shallow conversational chatter.

Stop that! You are so judgmental! Not fair, they are just trying to make pleasant conversation.

I smile at my self-scolding mind voice (while making a mental note to apply Zen principles of non-judgment to myself as well as to others), and tell my companions about the apartment I am staying in,. Thinking that I should take

longer to try to get to know them, I invite them to come and watch the sunset from my rooftop. They accept eagerly, and we arrange to meet later shortly before sunset.

Unfortunately, my first impressions are only reinforced by our second meeting. They are pleasant enough but seem to be afraid of silence, chattering incessantly through the setting of the sun and the meal we go for afterwards. They seem like nice girls, but days on end in their constant company? I think they may drive me crazy, so I avoid the issue of going with them. When Sandra, (or is it Susan?) says how nice it would be to go together, I murmur a noncommittal reply. I take their guest-house number and decide I will sleep on the idea.

When I arrive back at the apartment after dinner, Pradeep is still in his office. I stop and talk to him too about a camel trek.

"It is most unfortunate, this trouble with Pakistan." He says referring to the border skirmishes that have continued for the past three months, despite the official end to the Kargil war.

"At the moment the best place - the sand dunes at Samm" he says, tapping their location on the map spread on his desk, "are forbidden for us to go by the army. They are only 26 miles west of here, but too near to the border with Pakistan for us to visit."

"What a pity!" I have read about the shifting dunes of Samm, with their exotic wind markings.

"Not to worry, Miss Karen. Still there is some very nice places nearer. I have a group departing in two days. Two very good couples: one is coming from Germany and two is coming from France. You can be going with them."

Just what I don't want! To be a fifth wheel trailing along with people whose language I don't speak.

"I think I would prefer to go alone."

A strange, disconcerting gleam enters his eyes.

"Ahhh! I see, I see. It is being more romantic alone, isn't it?"

Romance being the last thing on my mind, I do not immediately pick up on his meaning.

"It's quieter, and I like peace for my mediation."

His head moves from side to side. "And for the doing of yoga. Better if it is just you and the camel driver."

His innuendo is clearer this time, but I am startled at his mention of my yoga practice.

"Oh, but.., yes. How do you know I do yoga?"

"One of my friends he sees you in the morning on the rooftop."

"Oh," suddenly what he has been hinting at hits me. He thinks I want to go off into the desert and shag a camel driver! I start to laugh. He smiles politely, puzzled at why the mention of his friend has caused mirth.

"When do you wish to go to the desert?" He moves back to business. "I will find my best, most handsome driver to take care of you," he smirks again.

I laugh harder. I suppose from his perspective, fed by Hollywood movies, and the dating couples who visit his country, all Western women want nothing more than rampant sex with any man she spends time with alone. Traditionally, Indian women, once past puberty, are never alone with a man who is not a member of their

family until their wedding night. Although this is changing somewhat in the bigger cities, out here the women still follow that rule. If you don't know Western culture except through the media, and you are comparing movie life with this culture where women are property, the oversimplification of relationships between men and women by Western film-makers supports his view.

Having recently emerged from a one-year celibacy vow though, which had stretched to fifteen months until I found somebody I wanted to have sex with, I think I can control any passion that might conceivably arise between a non-deodorant using, once a week washing, sleep-next-to-a-camel most nights man, and me. I could be wrong, but I doubt it.

"I'll let you know," I say, standing to leave. "I'll have to think about it some more."

At lunchtime the next day, I am sitting in a rooftop restaurant at the edge of the city staring out at the desert. A young boy is following a flock of goats, who are nibbling at the sparse grass and shrubs which line the desert. A woman is carrying a fat, round-bottomed pot of water on her head. She is heading away from the city and I wonder where she is going. I am thankful that the citronella oil I have dabbed on myself seems to be keeping the mosquitoes away.

"You like the desert, madam?"

I turn towards the soft voice. A tall, slim, red turbaned man with a bristling moustache and deep kind eyes is looking down at me.

"Yes I do, very much."

"May I sit? I have some pictures to show you."

I like the feel of his energy. It is cool and smooth. He radiates kindness and awareness.

"Please do," I gesture towards the chair opposite.

"My name is Kheta. Here are some pictures of the desert, " he says simply, and hands me the book he is carrying. It contains photos stuck on each page and writing beneath each picture. I flick through it. The photos are magical desert scenes, interspersed with pictures of groups of people, tourists, and camels. Except for the purely landscape photos, Kheta is in every one. I read the comments written beneath them. They are testimonials from the people in the photographs, mostly in English, but a few in French and German. One is in Hebrew. The common consensus seems to be: 'Magical trip' and 'Kheta is not a cheater'.

He waits until I look up from the book before he speaks again.

"I am one man small business. I work with my family and my camels. I am less price, no commissions. I am honest man. Kheta is no cheater."

"How much do you charge?"

"How long you go for?"

"Four or five days."

"You go alone?"

"Yes." I watch his eyes carefully. "I don't want to be with a group. I want to meditate alone in the desert."

He looks just as carefully back at me. "I see you are a Saddhu. For you I can make arrange you go alone. Some women they go alone, they want make sex with

camel man." He spits on the floor. "You no see camel man, you look different way. When you want go?"

"Tomorrow or the next day."

He taps, his fingers thoughtfully on the table.

"I can send two camel boys with you?"

"Why?"

"I have small problem. Tomorrow I take one couple, and one man, five days. You come with group first day. Next three days, you go with my son and my brother's son. Then last day you meet us, we come back together. Ok?"

"Why, do I need two of them to come with me?"

"They are young. They need company and they watch each other. Both is good."

"How young?"

"16 years."

I think a moment. I trust him, and I think I was meant to go with him. I could have chosen any restaurant, to eat in; a different restaurant and I would not have met him at this time. Although labeling me a Saddhu, an ascetic spiritual seeker, is a little extreme, it is closer to the truth than being thought of as a sexual adventurer, although sometimes... . *Stop! Take your thoughts elsewhere.*

"Ok," I say. "If the price is good."

He names a price that is 15 percent less than I have been quoted elsewhere, as he said there is no commission charge.

I return to the place that has been home to me for the past ten days and reluctantly, I tell Pradeep that I am giving up my apartment. He is unhappy that I have chosen to go camel trekking with Kheta instead of letting him arrange my trip, and is non-commital when I say that I would like to rent the apartment again when I return. I spend the early afternoon inside the cool apartment dividing my possessions. The majority of my stuff I put in my large backpack, which I will leave in store. The things I will need while I am in the desert I place in my small daypack. I travel light. There will be no one but the camels to notice that I am not planning on changing my clothes very often, and I have the feeling that they will smell worse than me anyway. Clean underwear, toiletries, sun-block, my sleeping bag and my journal are all I really need. I put some basic first aid stuff in too, then I am done.

We meet at six in the morning, Guy and Michal: a Belgian couple, Rani: a young Israeli, Kheta, his son Arjun, his nephew Ali and me. Kheta and Ali take care of the others, while Arjun introduces me to my camel Lalla. It means necklace, and all along her long neck, strands of different coloured beads hang. Arjun pulls at Lalla's halter to make her kneel, she brays sulkily and does not move. Camels have a reputation for being stubborn, bad tempered and unfriendly, although those who know consider them intelligent and good tempered. I am reserving my judgement, Lalla doesn't sound very friendly. Arjun tugs harder and she drops to her first front knees, then folds her legs beneath her like a blind person's collapsing cane. Camels seem to have two knee joints in their legs; one facing forwards, the other backwards. When they sit their legs are stacked rather than bent beneath them. Her hump, which stores excess fat, is covered with a thick blanket and a sack packed with

equipment for our journey is roped on behind. Camels are ideally suited to arid, barren terrains. They can go 5-7 days without food or water and lose up to a quarter of their body weight without harm. However, if this happens, then Lalla's hump would get thin and slip sideways as she used up her fat. Idly I wonder what she will eat on our journey, as it will get very uncomfortable if there is no fat for me to sit on.

Arjun adds a saddle without stirrups, and an additional blanket for comfort and I climb aboard. Lalla rises. Her back legs unfold first and I am thrown forward towards her neck, then her front legs unfurl; suddenly I am a long way from the ground. Six feet tall at the shoulder and seven at the hump, camels have been the desert dwellers' primary source of transport, meat, milk, wool and hides for centuries. Now, ever adaptable, they carry us city dwellers too. At least we only have to worry about carrying water for ourselves, not the camels. Lalla, has just had a drink and her capacity is enormous. She can drink 21 gallons of water in 10 minutes and store any excess in her blood. It doesn't get wasted in perspiration either. Camels have a unique body thermostat that enables them to lower their body temperature by up to 6C. This keeps their body temperature lower than the surrounding air, thus avoiding perspiration and conserving water.

When everyone is mounted, except Arjun and Ali, (their camel is roped to Kheta's), we begin a slow walk. I'm led by Arjun who holds Lalla's reins, Ali walks between Guy and Michal holding both of their reins and Rani, who has never ridden anything before, is secured to the other side of Kheta.

In a slow procession, we pass through the town and out into the desert. Officially, a desert is a place that receives less than ten inches of rain a year. Whilst

the image of a desert that springs to mind is endless undulating sand dunes, the Thar desert is a mixture of sand, rocky outcrops and gravel plains. There is a surprising amount of vegetation, hardy grasses and small bushes like gum Arabic acacia and euphorbia. The Khejari trees are the only trees that grow to a fairly decent size, providing much needed shade.

When the town is behind us and we are on the shrub dotted gravel plain facing the sand dunes in the distance, we come to a halt. Finally, Arjun hands me the reins and I am free to ride by myself. Arjun and Ali sit double on the spare camel and when we are all ready, we begin to ride in earnest. At first, we laugh and call out to each other as our camels, free from the restraining hands of their experienced handlers, try to wander off and nibble at succulent morsels of bushes. But soon the vast emptiness claims our thoughts and we ride in silence.

Lalla sways from side to side as she walks, it's a very soothing motion. Camel riding is easier than horseriding and much less stressful on the bottom. In this early morning before the sun bakes the desert and bleaches the colour it touches, my eyes feed on the constantly changing hues of the landscape. Innumerable shades of brown and purple intermittently dotted with green flow in front of my eyes. I feel cleansed by the winds that blow and the constant swaying motion lulls me into a meditative state.

My thoughts are tangled and crowded in my head; they dart frantically, beating sparrows' wings scattering panicked at the approach of a cat. They creep around the sides of my mantra, flowing over it like floodwater dominating the land. Stillness is outside, inside is chaos. Early patterns of violence, long suppressed, have

crept to the surface: *why did I stay so long*? The dichotomy of his loving-hatred, of our wounded-loving, that has lain long buried, has erupted in a flurry of questions. *Why did I stay? Why did I lie? Why did I think it better when the physical violence became verbal instead*? When he gained control of those alcohol-fed, physical explosions, and instead matched violent tongue to violent tongue. Our mouths weapons: slashing, soul-wounding knives. I have long accepted my own responsibility for the shared erection of the battle arena, equal fault with no blame. *But, why did I stay so long*? I have no answer. Now the question is out there floating on the surface of my mind. Freed, the thoughts settle. Content to be still, now they have escaped from their cage. The moment lengthens.

P a u s e s.

I,

b e c o m e s,

O n e.

A shout from up ahead pulls me into the world again. I look east where Kheta's arm points. Rising up from the flatness of the sand, is a collection of dun colored buildings surrounded by a waist high restraining wall. Kheta stops and waits. When we are all close together, we ride through the gap in the wall and enter the silent, empty village. Arjun clucks his tongue and suddenly I am sailing forward as Lalla begins to kneel. I grip tightly with my knees, and my head snaps back roughly as Lalla folds her rear legs and I am level again. I regain my balance, swing my right leg forward over her neck and slide down her side. My legs feel a little rubbery as my feet touch the ground for the first time in hours.

I slide my pack over my shoulders and look around. A dozen raggedy children have emerged from the buildings and are giggling and nudging each other as they watch us alight from the camels. Kheta calls out, and the biggest boy saunters over to him and speaks. One boy aged around 10 or 11 is staring intently at me. I smile at him, but he just picks his nose absent-mindedly and continues to stare. The boy Kheta has spoken to, runs inside one of the buildings and emerges with an elderly man. Kheta and the man immediately enter into an urgent sounding conversation, while Arjun and Ali stand nearby listening intently. The children continue to stare. There is not a woman in sight. My fellow travelers and I exchange awkward glances and after a brief discussion decide to wander round and have a look at the village. We are trailed by the pack of giggling children who will not speak or come closer even when Michal offers candy. But they do scramble to catch the sweets as she throws them.

On closer inspection, we can see that the walls of the huts are crumbling. There are patches that look as if a large animal has taken several bites out of the walls. I peer through an open doorway. All is dark inside the one large room, and there does not appear to be any furniture apart from a low table set against one wall. What appear to be rolls of cloth are stacked against another wall and there are several woven storage baskets next to the low table. A shadowy figure is crouched next to them, but before I can decide whether it would be rude to call out a greeting or not, I feel a touch on my pack.

I swing round; the nose-picking boy is running away from me, clutching something in his hand. I reach behind me; the zip-front pocket where I keep pens,

oddments, and a few rupees in beggars' money is open. I quickly check. My tiny alarm clock is gone. The rest of the children run after the boy shouting and quickly disappear around the side of a building. I start to give chase, then stop. It will be inconvenient, but I have no chance of getting it back. Ruefully, I explain my loss to my companions and they sympathize and exchange stories of theft in this poverty stricken land. We hear shouting, and suddenly the children are back. One of the boys approaches me, his hand extended. Lying in his palm is my little clock.

"Is yours! He take...." His hands point to the corner of the adjacent building where nose-picker is staring sullenly at me.

"Is bad! He..." his voice trails off. Not having the words for what he wants to say, his forefinger extends to his temple and moves in a stabbing motion as he grimaces.

Crazy, is the word my mind supplies as I interpret his gesture.

"Why thank you!" I take my clock and reach into my pocket for a few rupees to reward him. He backs away from my outstretched hand without taking the money it contains. He frowns and spits on the floor.

"No! No is BAD!" he says emphatically and runs away to join the other children.

I feel intensely guilty. First, I have prejudged these people: they are poor so obviously they are thieves. Then I have assumed that the voluntary action of rectifying a moral wrong can be paid for as if it were a commodity. I am cheapened and diminished, both by my thoughts and my behavior.

Silently I return to my camel. I no longer wish to gawk at this village as if it were placed here for my entertainment. There are no power lines here, so obviously there are neither telephones nor electricity. Later as I ride and see a dozen women trudging back towards the village with large water pots balanced on their heads, I will realize there is no running water either. For now, I sit quietly in the shade cast by Lalla and examine my own misconception. I had projected my mind's preconceived notions outwards, and had been unable to see the reality of these people because I'd been blinded by the reflection of my own notions.

We spend the rest of the afternoon riding deeper into the desert. I try to live it all, every minute. I gently pull my mind back, whenever it tries to roam into any time that is not now. From the past come pre-conceptions and pre-judgments, into the future we throw our projections; only living moment to moment in the now, allows life to unfold just as it is.

Now I'm laying on a sand dune while Kheta is cooking our evening meal. Light has fallen from the high, clear sky; the universe is breathing soft and slow. Dark encircling bands have dragged the sun down past west, as the silky, cornflower-blue eastern sky has faded to velvet dark. The scent of ginger rises from the pan below, and the first star sparkles for a moment alone, before the garlic is added, and the eyes of the night flicker open. The stars pull me up, and unresisting I fall into the sky. The vegetables sizzle and I drift through space, lazily wondering why the high white clouds are twinkling and have stars on their outside. A long forgotten science lesson floats to the surface of my mind, and Hera's spilt milk is named: the Milky Way.

After dinner, we sit around the campfire talking softly. The magic of the starlit dark unpolluted by artificial light or sound enfolds us, hushing us as the vast empty silence, broken only by the occasional tinkling of the camels bells, penetrates our souls. Our voices trail away and Kheta begins to drum on partially empty water bottles. His surprisingly high voice wails a litany of sadness as his fast moving palms create a throbbing beat in my head. The emotion in his voice shapes the unknown words and catches at my heart as he sings. The universal language of music slides through me easily, and I am set adrift on a current of unrequited love. His voice stops, the beat pauses then suddenly begins again. A lively, happy tune that catches our hands and sweeps them together as we help clap out the beat. Arjun, with his father's slender frame and dark gentle eyes, taps two sticks against a rock in a furiously fast musical contrapunctuation to his father's twinkling fingers, while short stocky Ali jumps up and capers a jig as he sings some jolly words. My laughter bubbles out as I arm dance for them. My hands, arms and shoulders undulate and rotate while my body first remains still, then, as it too is swept up in the energy, I sway in counterpoint to the movement of my arms.

The music becomes quieter, more contemplative, and I lie back on the still warm sand and stare at the star patterns. I am touched in this moment by the magic of being, and smiling, I dissolve into the universe.

I sleep long and well, waking before daybreak to sit in meditation. I use my re-rolled sleeping bag as a zafu (a traditional zen meditation cushion), while around me the camp sleeps. In this pre-dawn moment I am suspended between night and

day, balanced in a moment of being. I meditate on the 'one clear and pure thing' given in a riddle in a poem by Zen master Seung Sahn.

> Coming empty handed, going empty handed--that is human.
> When you are born, where do you come from?
> When you die, where do you go?
> Life is like a floating cloud which appears.
> Death is like a floating cloud which disappears.
> The floating cloud itself does not originally exist.
> Life and death, coming and going, are also like that.
> But there is one thing which always remains clear.
> It is pure and clear, not dependent on life and death.
> Then what is the one pure and clear thing? (Seung Sahn, 1997, p. 315)

It is a riddle without a word answer; you just have to know it. I sit in 'don't know mind' and breathe. When I am done, I still 'don't know' and I'm smiling. I open my eyes and watch the sun rise.

After breakfast, Arjun, Ali and I ride off in one direction, while the others ride away at a 45 degree angle from us. For a while I can see them riding single file off to my right. Gradually, the distance between us grows and I need to turn my head more and more if I am to see the other party at all. Then we ride over some sand dunes and down the other side and Arjun and Ali are the only humans left in sight. Tired of looking at their backs, I snap my reins and smack my tongue against the alveolar ridge behind my teeth, as I have seen and heard the camel herders do. To my amazement, Lalla responds and begins a lumbering run. We overtake the boys and of her own volition Lalla slows down. *That's good,* I think. *Since I have absolutely no idea how to make her stop! Duh! Find out first next time Karen!*

Now there is only the desert in front of me. The gently undulating land fills my sight in every direction. I marvel at the trees whose foliage begins from a geometrically straight line about 10 feet from the ground then rises in a protective

dome over the trunk. They look sculpted, as if they have been grown on a straight edged ruler. As the morning deepens, we pass by some trees with more straggly lower foliage. Lalla stops to nibble, tearing off and eating the leaves and small branches as far as she can reach on one tree, before moving onto the next. The mystery of their total symmetry is solved: they've been camel pruned.

I am wearing a thin white cotton t-shirt, under long sleeved, drawstring waisted white muslin pajamas. Over the pants, I am wearing an ankle length, thin, navy blue cotton wrap-around skirt that I bought in Thailand, and my feet are bare as I sit comfortably cross legged on my camel. On my head is a floppy brimmed white hat over which I have draped a thin muslin scarf. It is loosely crossed over my nose and throat in front to keep the sand out, then wound round the back of my neck where the ends are tucked neatly under the edges. With my sunglasses covering my eyes, and my neck and face protected by the scarf there is very little of me left exposed to the merciless, and cruelly aging rays of the sun. But, despite the SPF 40 sun block I have smeared on my hands, feet and face, when we stop for lunch by a small lake surrounded on one side by life preserving trees, my exposed parts are hot and flushed.

It is half past eleven, and nothing but the heat haze is moving in this arid land. It must be 45C (113F) or more. Arjun unsaddles the camels and places a blanket on the ground under a copse of trees for me. Sitting under their blissful shade I am protected from the fierceness of the suns rays; lethargic and quiescent, in a trance like state I watch fire djinns dance in the shimmering air, with my journal lying open and ignored on my lap. Arjun and Ali busy themselves under an adjacent clump of

trees. They speak softly to each other as they are preparing a delicious vegetable curry for lunch. This is my first experience of the way they separate themselves from me, the separation that will grow more pronounced as our journey progresses. Men and women sit, eat and work separately in this rigidly gender divided society, so what they are doing is practicing their own culture; later, after they have observed me more, the distance is intensified by their perception of me as a saddhu.

We will shelter here until 3.30 or 4 when the midday heat has abated, and it is safe for us to ride once more. I turn to face the lake and put my rolled sleeping bag under my butt. With my legs and arms in their customary position, my back and head straight, and my eyes downcast at a 45 degree angle, I slip easily into a meditation. My gaze dissolves into the tawny grains and with unfocused mind and eyes I go home to being. Thoughts come, I notice them; they pass and I do not follow them. My breath slows and my heart beats slower. My body cools, I am at peace.

Some time later, my awareness is drawn by the tinkling of goats bells and melodious voices. I make a seated bow, nose to blanket with hands outstretched, and sit upright, once again fully mindful of my surroundings. Under the trees chatting quietly with Arjun and Ali are two young boys and one older man, who is quietly enjoying a cigarette. The camels are sitting, looking supercilious as usual while goats roam among the trees, nibbling at whatever they find. Down by the lake half a dozen exceedingly skinny cattle are drinking and a bunch of sheep are milling in a tightly controlled bunch. Perhaps it is the change in my breath, or maybe I make a sound I am unaware of, but as I look Arjun breaks off his conversation and calls out to me,

"Chai, memsahib?"

"Yes please, Arjun."

At my acquiescence, he rises and removing one pot from the fire, he puts another in its place. In moments, the chai is reheated and he brings a cup to me. Its spicy flavor - black tea, cardomon, cloves and cinnamon - is refreshing, although I am surprised to see we have milk in it. The previous evening, we had drunk it black. Arjun sees my look and smiles proudly.

"We give chai, he give milk from cow," he says waving his arm in the direction of the old man beneath the trees.

I don't have the heart to tell him I prefer it black, and smile widely instead.

"Very clever Arjun," I say in praise, unable to lie and say it is good.

"Soon we have food, curry and rice. No meat for memsahib. Good?"

"Very good," I tell him, still smiling.

While our food continues to cook slowly, I write up my journal. I am aware of being stared at, but when I look up, the goat and sheep-herder boys look hastily away.

My lunch is brought to me, and I am amused to see that after I have been served, the remainder of the pan of food is shared between the rest of them. The old man draws a small bundle from his clothes, and whatever is in there is shared among them too. The other boys do not seem to have brought any lunch with them, and I wonder if they usually go all day without sustenance or whether they are just not sharing what they have. Later, after I have napped for a while and the visitors have departed, without ever saying a word to me, I approach Arjun and ask him.

"Arjun, I notice you shared our food with those boys," I begin.

His face turns mulish in the universal way of teenagers, "You have much, you don't need all," he interrupts me sulkily.

"Indeed I don't and I'm happy to share," I tell him gently, "I just wondered if they had no food of their own."

His face relaxes, a little. "They have only bread, we are poor people here in desert. They keep bread for later; not be hungry now. Old man, he rich, he have six cows, he give milk for memsahib," he pauses, and, after a sidelong glance at me, in a rush of honesty he continues, "and meat for Ali and me." He watches my face cautiously.

"That's good!" I exclaim, "I am happy you have meat."

He smiles at me, "You saddhu, you no need meat, we tell old man he give to camel boys, it like he give to saddhu. Then you give bless to him."

I frown sternly, "I am not a saddhu, Arjun, and you must not tell people I am."

He looks at me blankly, "You do meditation, you do yoga, your eyes look in god world and no see people, that is saddhu in India. What you call this person in your country?"

I look at him helplessly. I have no one word to describe myself and my perception of the interrelatedness of everyone and everything, let alone one that will encompass that and the practice that I make in my attempt to be mindful of it too. I can only explain by painting a picture with words he will not understand. I concede defeat.

"We must use many words, Arjun. Hindi is better, Saddhu it will be."

He smiles happily.

"But, I cannot bless these people Arjun. You must tell them I cannot. Ok?"

He frowns, "but they not know and Ali and me, we can have meat!"

"No! If they share with you, that's fine, and you may share what we have with them, but no exchanging meat for blessings! Ok?"

He stares at me, nods and departs without saying anything.

I read for a while, and then bored, I decide to brave the heat and go and look around. As I wander into the direct light of the sun, the temperature around me soars and the glare of light from the sand sears my eyes. I hastily pull my sunglasses on and amuse myself by following the animal hoofprints in the sand. I have no idea what animal made which track, and my city upbringing is suddenly very noticeable. I concentrate on at least identifying the differences between the prints when I see some strange curving lines heading off at a tangent. I follow them wondering idly what made such strange tracks, which look as if someone had lightly drawn a stick across the sand in a series of sinuous curves. *Snakes! Snake tracks stupid! Go back!* Startled by my insistent mind voice, I turn around and retrace my steps. Reflecting on why I step out of Zen mind and am so self-condemnatory when I err, as I do so. *It's all to do with holding the opinion that I am/must be perfect, instead of accepting myself just as I am, I think.*

Because of its diverse habitat, and despite being the test site of the first Indian nuclear device in 1974, the Thar desert is home to an amazingly rich collection of wildlife, some of which is fast disappearing in other parts of India. There are 23 species of Lizard and 25 varieties of snake, some of them indigenous to the area.

Additionally, one can still find wild ass, the Indian gazelle, black buck, and the great Indian bustard, a bird practically extinct in the rest of India and sadly, despite its protected status, seriously under threat here from poachers.

Uneasily, I wonder how far we are here from Pokhran, the site of the nuclear explosion, but decide that I really don't want to know. Sometimes ignorance is best. I shall start to worry only if my hair begins to fall out and my gums to bleed! Chuckling at my stupidity, I reach the grove of trees where I left the boys only to find the camels still tethered but no sign of their caregivers. I wander down to the lake and see the boys laughing and splashing each other as they swim. I perk up at the thought of a swim. After two days in the desert without washing, I feel grimy and my skin is gritty from the ubiquitous sand. Conscious of the cultural inhibitions against displays of the female body, I decide that I will swim in my clothes. They will soon dry in the scorching heat. Fully clothed, I wade into the water, delighting at its cool touch on my skin. I swim away from the area where the boys are, then stop and tread water. I am very aware that the water is not at all sterile and probably teems with all kinds of microscopic life, so keep my mouth firmly closed. I have no desire to contract cholera, giardiasis, dysentery, or any other of the water borne diseases I have read about.

Alerted to my presence by the sound of splashing water, the boys look my way. I wave, but they do not respond. Instead they begin to swim as fast as they can towards the shore. I am perplexed, despite my modest, fully clothed state; perhaps I am contravening some kind of moral code merely by being in the same body of water as them.

By the time I leave the water, the camels have been reloaded and it is time to move on again. In the heat of the afternoon, my clothes gently steam as we ride. Within twenty minutes they are dry. As dusk approaches, we make camp for the evening by the side of a large rock outcrop that rises into the sky and towers above my head. While the camels are being unburdened and my evening meal prepared, I decide I will climb the rock and look at the view. First, I pull the back edge of my skirt through my legs and tuck it firmly into the waistband at the front. This turns it into a loose-legged pair of calf length pants, similar in style to a dhoti, which men commonly wear all over India. Then, reassured that I am not going to trip over my skirt, I begin to scramble up the rock. Initially the way it slopes away from the ground allows me to walk up, but then it becomes sheerer, and I must climb the last six feet or so. I've never really climbed a rock before, but as this rock has plenty of hand and foot holds, it isn't too much different to climbing trees and I reach the top easily.

It's a perfect place to lie and dream; away to the west, I can see the last burning colours of the sun streak the sky in remembrance of its power, while to the east, night is creeping in.

At Ali's call, I am aroused from my dream of long gone lovers and begin the descent by moonlight. I slide over the edge until I find a ledge to rest my feet on, then look down to find the next. *Hmm, this is not so easy. Where do I put my damned foot now, I can't see a thing!* Carefully, I take my right foot from its perch and, bending my left knee, I slide my right leg cautiously from side to side against the rock below me until I find another purchase for my foot. *OK! That's how.*

Within minutes, I reach the more gentle slopes and run lightly down to the ground, thankful for the bright moon and my excellent night vision.

Tonight there is no singing. Arjun and Ali shyly ask me a few questions about England, but soon retreat back into the shadows to scour the dishes with sand - which gets them spotlessly clean - leaving me to sit alone by the fire with my journal and my thoughts for the hours before I sleep.

The slow deep breathing of my two teenage camel herders, their breath and bodies entwined together beneath a blanket 30 yards away, combined with the restless movements and soft lip-smacking of the camels who never seemed to sleep, are the first sounds I hear as I wake. In the still starlit pre-dawn light, I unzip my sleeping bag, rise and stretch. Rubbing the small tender patch at the top of my left thigh, proof of my sloppy ground clearing last night, I pick up the water bottle and head for the low scrub behind me. *Morning urination is such a pleasant sensation of release,* I think as I trickle water over my left hand and wash my genitals. I save the luxury of toilet paper for those daily occurrences when my Western mind rebels against the custom of millennia.

Moving back to camp, I replace my water bottle then turn in a circle until I find the faintest glimmer of gray light spreading in a shimmering line along the horizon. Facing East, I place my feet ankle to ankle and spread my toes like tree roots fanned out across the ground. I take a long deep inward breath, filling first my abdomen then my chest. Straightening my spine to lengthen out of my sacrum, I pull my shoulders back and drop them down, relaxed. I stretch my neck upwards, my head light above me and hold the breath for a brief moment, releasing it slowly as

my hands uncurl, palms facing my thighs. Standing in Tadasana, the first of my yoga poses, I breathe slowly, centred in pervasive peace. Until the disdainful harrumphing and bubbling farts of the camels, float into my ears and pull my awareness away from my breath. My body reacts and my hands' ball into fists as the world outside draws me back.

I resist. Taking a deep breath, I uncurl my hands, raise them in front of my chest, and, palms together, enter prayer pose, the first of the Surya Namaskara - salute to the sun - poses. *Inhale.* My hands move upwards, reaching skyward as I tilt my head back. *Exhale.* I dive forward to touch my toes, face lightly pressed against my knees. *Inhale.* Clear and light my left foot moves back, my right forward, knee bent perpendicular to the ground and right thigh parallel to it; I rest my hands lightly on the dirt as my back straightens and I look forward, unseeing and inwardly focused in the Equestrian pose. My right foot slips forward and jerks my head back, as the whispering voices and clattering pans of the camel drivers preparing morning chai, is carried forward on the wind.

Exhale. My right leg extends back as my hands reach forward; feet, hands and chest press towards the grainy earth, and my head hangs to the ground in an inverted 'v': Downward facing Dog pose. I hold my breath in full exhalation, and knees, chest, chin and toes touch the floor for a brief moment. *Inhale.* Legs lie flat along the ground as my palms push my arms into full extension, head and upper body rising sinuously into this, the cobra pose. The hissing, splashing sound of a camel peeing against a rock intrudes on my consciousness.

Exhale. My upper body drops as my legs rise into the downward dog once again. *Inhale.* Without volition, I thrust into the Equestrian position. *The damned camel is still peeing. Will it ever stop? Exhale.* I return to Hands to toes position, face pressed into my knees. *Inhale.* I am upright, arms stretched up and back, face towards the lightening sky. *Exhale.* In prayer pose again, I look to the razor thin arc of the sun's first appearance as the first blush of dawn begins to lace the crepuscular sky.

My yoga both refreshes and calms me. All the tension accumulated in a night of sleeping on the desert floor is gone, soothed away by the complicated series of stretches that occupies the mind and unites the body with the spirit, leaving me both energized and tranquil. I muse on pranayama (loosely translated as life-force [prana] or breath control), which is so essential to both the physical exercise I do and my meditation practice. Since both are forms of yoga, this is no surprise really. Many people think of yoga only as the kind of physical exercise that I have just performed, but that is Hatha yoga and there are many other kinds. Hatha yoga, is physical and focuses on postures and breathing, but others have a greater focus on spirituality. When I chant during meditation, I am performing Mantra Yoga, and similarities can be found between Zen meditation and Raja Yoga where the "goal is a complete stilling of the mind, so that the light of the indwelling spirit may shine out[1]."

The practice of pranayama enables me to continually refocus during my yogic asanas despite the intrusions of sound-expressed energy from the surrounding life,

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[1] http://www.holistic-online.com/Yoga/yoga_types_raja_yoga.htm

like those that had just worried and tugged at my energy like restless children's fingers pulling their mama's skirts for attention. Additionally it allows me to continually refocus on the space between thoughts during meditation.

At breakfast, the boys barely speak to me. They keep their distance and their tones are muted. They have been that way since I finished my yoga practice, but it got worse after Ali burned his hand while making chapattis (flat unleavened bread) and I dabbed a little burn cream on it to take away the pain and help heal it. From their lowered eyes, and respectful demeanor, I think they have now attributed healing powers to me. *Whatever! Superstitious pair! Oops, where did that thought come from?* My contempt offends me, despite my attempt to use Zen mind and merely meditate on its origin while I wait for the camels to be loaded up for the day. However, after ten minutes or so, just as I have begun to realize how my thoughts have been shaped by the scientific paradigm of the culture into which I was born, a harsh continuous braying from the camels distracts me and I get up to see why they are making such a noise. Lalla is standing and snorting her distress while Arjun is beating the other camel with a stick, which brays loudly in protest as Ali tugs its reins in an effort to make it rise.

"Stop! What are you doing," I cry in protest.

"Is bad camel, memsahib! It not get up. We must make it." Arjun replies firmly.

I look at the camel, which has slumped its head back to the ground.

"It doesn't look right," I say, not really knowing what is right about a camel, but it has sickly energy, and I am distressed by their punitive beating of it.

They exchange glances. "Memsahib, we will leave now," Arjun asserts. "Ali will come later with other camel."

"But..." my voice trails off as Arjun turns his back and ignores me, bringing Lalla to her knees so I can climb aboard.

When I am mounted, he hands me the reins and clucks Lalla into movement. I turn my head to see him trailing along behind me in her shadow. Quickly I stop the camel.

"Arjun, you can't walk. Here, get up behind me."

"I ok" he says haughtily.

"Just until Ali comes. It'll be quicker."

He looks at me hesitantly then gives in.

"Ok."

Lalla kneels and Arjun climbs on behind me. He clucks and we are off again into the peace of the desert. Arjun sits stiffly upright behind me, attempting not to touch me but Lalla's constant swaying motion causes his groin to rub against my bottom. It is not long before the poor boy gets an erection and despite his efforts to move away from me, there is no space on a camel for him to retreat to. I can feel his distress, and I am not exactly happy with being prodded in the bottom either. My eyes alight on my purple sleeping bag, tied onto the pommel of Lalla's saddle. I lean forward, untie it and without a word pass it back to Arjun.

"Thank you memsahib, thank you!" He cries with heartfelt gratitude, as he stuffs the soft cylinder between us.

I smile inwardly. I never knew anyone so distressed by my giving him an erection before. Peace returns, and we continue our journey in silence.

What a wonderful item my sleeping bag has turned out to be! It's a modesty shield, a pillow on trains, a meditation cushion, a protection against bed bugs, a ground sheet to sit on, and a warm space in which to sleep. I had hesitated about buying it, almost persuading myself that I could make do with my cotton sleeping-sheet in such hot countries. I am so thankful I'd decided as it was so small, I would take it just in case. It is one of my most versatile possessions and, along with my Swiss army knife, one of the ones I would most hate to lose.

We break early for lunch, coming to rest under the shade of a small stand of trees. There is no sign of Ali. But, despite the vast open emptiness of this place, by the time Arjun has unloaded the camel and made a fire to brew the ubiquitous chai, I hear the familiar sound of goat bells. Two young lads join Arjun, and by the time the tea is brewed, another couple of older men have wandered in with a bunch of sheep. They nod at me and settle down with the other males. *Here I am trying to meditate in the middle of a quiet desert and instead find I'm in the middle of an animal farm. Those sheep stink! Where are the women? That's what I want to know!*

As if in answer to my thought, a shadow crosses my blanket. I look up and find an ancient woman in a bright red skirt and grimy yellow blouse grinning almost toothlessly down at me. I am startled by the silence of her approach, but smile at her in welcome. She sits herself down on the sand at the edge of my blanket and, removing a small box from the folds of cloth at her waist, companionably offers me some snuff. Despite my two-year cessation of smoking, I take a pinch and we grin

happily at each other. I pat the blanket next to me and beckon her closer, but she shakes her head and accompanies it by a stream of incomprehensible language. I have no idea what she said so decide to begin our communication on a much more basic level.

I pat my chest and say my name, she repeats it then uses the same gesture to give me hers. Harshini, I repeat it carefully. She laughs and corrects my pronunciation. Later I find out it means happy and I wonder if she gave me her name or her disposition, perhaps they are the same thing. Even though she speaks not one word of English and I know only three words of Hindi, we chat for an hour. Teaching English and living in countries where one doesn't speak the language really sensitizes a person to the meaning of sign and gesture, and I find that I'm quite adept at sand drawing. She is married with four children, 6 grandchildren but only one husband she assures me, and nods approvingly when she finds that I am single. Two of the goat boys wander over to us curiously, brave now that there is someone else there with me. One of the boys sits on the edge of my blanket, and she hits him.

"...sadhu..." she scolds him, and he moves as if shot.

I take pictures and the goat boys, who have learned a little English at school, beg me to send them a copy of the photograph. When I ask where I should send it, one prints his name in my journal, followed by Class XA, Government Secondary School, Jaisalmer, Rajisthan 345001. X is the roman numeral for 10 so I judge him to be around 15 years old. I ask what he will do when he finishes school and he points to the goats,

"I will look after them. One day I will have a car!" He puffs out his chest proudly as he tells me his dream.

Arjun brings me my lunch, and everyone politely turns their backs so I can eat in peace. When I have finished, we chat again briefly for a while before I bring the conversation to a halt to begin my midday mediation. Harshini stays sitting, staring out into the desert, but the goat boys wander away. When I am finished, Harshini pulls a face of pain and points to her left shoulder. I touch it and she nods fiercely, raising her right arm high above her head and then dropping it and wincing as she lifts her left arm barely to shoulder height. I am a good masseuse, so I feel the shoulder gently. The muscles are tense and bunched oddly in one place. She has pulled a muscle. I massage it gently to release the pressure and realign the flesh, feeling first the 'wrongness' then the 'rightness' in the muscular energy flow. When I am happy with the way it feels, I apply a menthol balm to work its way into the shoulder and ease the strain. A look of wonder crosses her face as she tries it out and finds she has more flexibility. I am embarrassed when she bows in front of me and touches my feet.

As the afternoon begins to cool, our visitors return to their houses, but there is still no sign of Ali. Arjun tells me we will wait there for him, and I agree. I am worried about his disappearance. Night has fallen and we have already eaten dinner by the time he reappears on foot carrying a saddle. The boys confer briefly before announcing to me that the camel has died.

"What will we do?" I ask, shocked.

"Tomorrow we will go and get a new one, from my uncle's cousin's brother." Arjun waves his hand in the direction of the desert in front of us, where I can see nothing but sand stretching out to the horizon.

They know what they are doing, Karen. Have faith. "Ok" I shrug my shoulders, "tomorrow we will solve the problem."

As Arjun is reheating food for Ali, and they are talking softly about the day's events, their conversation suddenly ceases. Arjun picks up the cooking knife, and Ali picks up the small axe they have used to split branches into firewood. They call out, and out from the darkness an old man appears holding his hands high and speaking softly. They speak sharply to him, and he sits by the fire. Arjun approaches me.

"Memsahib, this man is sick. He wants you to help him."

"I can do nothing, Arjun. I am not a doctor."

"But you are a saddhu and have many powerful medicines."

My minor first aid treatments are coming back to haunt me. "But I can only help small sicknesses," I say helplessly. "What is wrong with this man?"

A brief shouted consultation reveals the information that his head is sick. I go to have a look. He has a huge pus filled boil on his forehead that is angry, red and inflamed.

"He has much pain, memsahib," Ali translates the man's low but urgent words for me.

I sigh. He needs to see a doctor, and I tell Ali to tell him that. At the man's reply, Ali looks at me.

"He has no money, memsahib. He is a poor man and the doctor costs much money."

I take the antiseptic cleanser from my bag and some clean cotton pads. I sponge the boil clean and dab on some antibiotic ointment. I squeeze some extra ointment onto a piece of paper I rip from my journal and seal it by twisting the paper round.

"Tell him he must wash his face twice every day with boiled water, then put a little of this cream on. Maybe it will help. Tell him to swallow these pills now," I place two aspirin in the man's hands, "and that will help the pain."

As Ali translates, I return my medicines to their pouch. I smile and walk away as the old man begins to thank me.

Blessed be the aspirin, I think before I settle down to sleep.

After breakfast, Arjun and Ali have an intense conversation while they are cleaning the dishes. When they are done, Arjun comes to give me the news.

"Memsahib, we go now to get new camel. We are one hour, maybe two."

Strong anxiety akin to panic surges through me at the thought of being left alone here. "Why do you both need to go? Isn't one enough? One of you can take Lalla and tie the new camel to her." I am babbling a little in my nervousness.

Ali's face turns sulky. Like many of us, he hates to be challenged, or corrected, and he has not yet learned to hide his reactions.

"Lalla not know new camel. She maybe fight him or he bite her. Ali must get new camel, I ride Lalla."

I give in. "Ok." My external voice is small, but internally anxiety is shouting at logic. *What if they don't come back? Of course they will come back, they are leaving their saddles and cooking equipment here. But what if they have an accident? No-one knows I am here.*

I feel very alone as they ride off bareback on Lalla. I examine my anxiety and try to discover its source; after all, I am very independent and used to traveling alone. I have plenty of water and food, I have already seen that this part of the desert is full of passing goat-herders, shepherds, and snuff taking women. All I have to do is begin to cook and someone is sure to turn up. As I follow the anxiety deeper beyond its superficial and irrelevant manifestations, I begin to see is that what I really fear is being out of control. I am lost in a strange place - not an unfamiliar occurrence - but here there is no map, no signposts and no people to ask the way. My independence in my traveling is only possible because of the accumulated knowledge of others. My solo journey has been cushioned by the invisible people who surround me - the mapmakers, the travel guide writers, and the timetable publishers. My self-reliance is actually the ability to choose the words of others that I will follow. Now I am in the position of having that reliance made manifest; the choice has been withdrawn, and I must acknowledge that I am dependant on others for my direction. It is a humbling experience.

Aware now that the cause of my suffering has been my creation of the illusion of my independence from others by my own mind, I acknowledge the falseness of that belief and cast it aside. Peace comes.

When Arjun and Ali return some two hours after their departure, I am calm and happy to see them. Quickly, they saddle up and we get moving before the heat of the day becomes too fierce.

We ride hard to make it to the next shady place before noon, but the sun is king here and today he is asserting his power. I feel my hands and feet burning, even as the breeze cools the burning of my clothes; I wonder idly about spontaneous combustion. In the wavering heat haze that rises from the desert floor in this pitiless land, the landscape colours, purples, browns and greens, rise into the air like a half seen rainbow which dips and dances for my delight.

Today's lunch stop is beneath an isolated clump of stunted trees abutting dunes. For the first time we remain quite alone. We stop late and begin our afternoon ride earlier than usual. By the time we stop for the night it is already dark and there are no trees, just sand. Our fire is made from undried camel dung. I am amazed both that it burns, and by the acrid, throat clenching, all pervasive heaviness of its smell. I eat little dinner.

As we will be rejoining the other group tomorrow, and I do not want Kheta claiming a share of what I give, I decide to tip the boys tonight. Unsure of how much would be proper, I give them one days' camel hire as a tip to be shared between them. From their heartfelt thanks, and swiftly hidden looks of amazement, I am aware that I have been overgenerous, but they have cared for me well.

We rejoin the other group late in the afternoon of the next day. To my delight, we are once again by a lake. Is it the other side of the one we camped by before? Are there two lakes in this desert—unlikely—or have we been going around in circles? I

neither know nor care beyond these passing thoughts. Pausing only to strip off my skirt, I shout 'hi' to the others and run to immerse myself in the water. We play for a while, splashing, laughing and yelling before emerging to lay on the bank in our underwear and let the sun dry us off. In the company of these other westerners, my adopted inhibitions against the exposure of any part of my body have sloughed off like the sand that encrusted me. But when it is time to rejoin the Rajisthanis', I cover myself again from top to toe in a Salwar Chemise, the local dress of baggy pants and an overdress - unlike Michal, who is happy to stay in shorts and a t-shirt. I ask her if she does not feel self conscious, but she laughs easily and says that she is dressed the way westerners dress and the locals are used to tourists. Besides, Guy is there if there are any problems. I smile, remembering my own insularity in the not so distant past, and am thankful for the lessons that my traveling has helped me learn.

Rani, the fourth member of our party is a young Israeli, who, like me is a philosophy graduate. He and I click immediately and are soon immersed in a fast and furious discussion of the merits of Heidegger's metaphysical philosophy of Phenomonology, and whether it can be considered separately from his nauseating support for Nazism. When we look up from our discussion, it is getting dark and we are alone. Guy and Michal have gone for a walk, Kheta is cooking and the boys have disappeared. Suddenly I'm starving. I go to find out how long it will be until dinner. At my question, Kheta chuckles,

"Arjun, says you will not eat with us. He and Ali, they make your dinner over there," he waves an arm into the night. "I tell them we are all together now, but he says you are a separate party." He laughs harder, amused by his son's insurrection.

I wander off in the direction Kheta has indicated. I walk for several minutes before I hear Lalla's bells and the muted voices of Arjun and Ali. By the light of their fire, I can see my sleeping bag laid out for me. Spelled out in small stones arranged on top of the sand next to it, is a single word: "Wellcum". Tears blur my eyes, as Arjun appears at my elbow.

"Is good place for you to sleep, yes? You have peace here. I tell my father," he draws himself up to his full height and puffs out his chest importantly, "you no want be with those noisy people. You are Saddhu. Me and Ali, we are knowing memsahib." He says this proudly, and with dignity.

Standing beneath the moon's opal gaze, caressed by the silky fingers of the warm night breeze and wrapped in the golden glow of caring, my tears and joy are a part of the connected oneness of this universe, a small part of which I am. In a moment of perfect clarity, the bonds that bind and separate us all, dissolve, and in a single moment of knowing I see every piece of matter as different perceptions of the same substance.

As another subtle flower blooms in my inner landscape, I perceive how much I have been blessed by this cosmic camel ride through the desert of my soul.

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Meditation 3

Since it appears that all groups stereotype others, how can we prevent ourselves from doing so? How can we overcome stereotyping when we see how erroneous it is?

If we practice paying attention to our thoughts as they arise and examine them carefully, we will notice that there is no true name and form. Humans may say that the sky is blue, but the sky never says "I am blue." If you ask an English speaker what sound a dog makes, s/he will say "woof woof". However, Korean speakers will say "wong wong" and Polish speakers will say "how how". The dog itself just barks. "Humans make all these names and forms and then become attached to them" (Gak, 1997, p. 321). Projecting mind-made movies onto situations and people around us is something that is all too easy to do. If we remain detached from the constructions of our minds, then we will not automatically project a template onto each 'other' that we meet, and attempt to squeeze them into it--no matter how ill it fits. We will see difference for the variation that it is, without limiting it by imposing a pre-set form around it.

It is not possible for us to correct another's thought. Only the person holding a thought can put it down; a stereotype will be believed unless the person holding it becomes aware of it for the false image it is. Either through the observance of personal thought, or through observance of the stereotyped while evidence to the contrary is presented. Hence, if we wish to show that a stereotype held about us is wrong, we must live our lives differently without being attached to the outcome.

Why is keeping Zen mind --focusing moment-to-moment--important? How can it help in the ESOL classroom?

As the Dalai Lama says, if we look for the present we cannot find it. "Just one second before the present is the past; and one second after is the future. There is no present" (1995, 83). However, in our consciousness "the past is no longer there and the future has not yet come: there is only the present" (1995, 84). All our internal experiences happen in the present one moment—*this* moment—at a time. When we live our lives moment-to-moment, things are just as they appear to us at each moment. They are uncolored by our previous experiences and unweighted by our expectations for the future. Zen Master Seung Sahn tells the story of an old Korean Zen Master Won Hyo. Won Hyo had been traveling for a very long time. At the end of one exhausting day he collapsed and fell asleep instantly. In the middle of the night, he awoke with a raging thirst. Despite knowing that he had run out of water, his hands grasped around searching for something to slake his thirst. His fingers encountered a cup; he picked it up and drank deeply of the deliciously refreshing water before falling asleep again. In the morning when he awoke, he discovered that the 'cup' he had drunk from the night before was a not picked clean skull in which he could see maggots and writhing insect life. As his mind supplied him with the past of the 'cup' and the possible future of his health he both vomited and gained enlightenment as he realized that it was his mind which created everything (Gak, 1997, p. 152-3). Living moment to moment, we perceive that which is around us on its merits at that particular moment. The same thing may be 'good' on one occasion and 'bad' on another.

In the ESOL classroom, we will encounter many situations that are alien to us and that we would consider unpleasant or unsuitable behavior when placed in our own cultural framework. Perhaps, two students from countries hostile to each other begin to yell loudly at each other in English over an exercise that they are supposed to be doing. We can treat this as a disciplinary problem, or we can see the moment just the way it is and deal with it accordingly: they are having genuine communication in the language we are teaching them and we can give them genuine praise for their accomplishment. Perhaps, a student clears his throat and then spits on the floor. We can turn away in disgust, or use this moment as the basis for a cross class discussion on different customs, perhaps even use it to begin a homework writing assignment on the subject of what customs in the culture of the other the students find most startling.

When we treat each moment as if it is the only moment there ever was, we see that no action is good or bad in itself. Sometimes an erection is good, sometimes it is bad; it all depends on the intention, the situation, the moment.

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Reflective Task 3

The reflective task that follows is intended to help personalize one of the situations in the narrative you have just read.

Within the narrative, (p. 98) I spoke about communicating without words. Think of three ways the human ability to communicate without language can be exploited in an ESOL classroom using:

a. The whole class

b. Pairs of students

c. Groups of students

Now think of a way you can exploit the exercises you have thought of, using the moment-to-moment philosophy.

Conclusion

Teaching English to speakers of other languages is not just a matter of taking a box of tricks and the philosophy of three P's--Presentation, Practice, Production--into the classroom. It is a journey into the culture of the other. Sometimes we step out of that culture as we leave the classroom, at others, it surrounds us and we are immersed within it. Whether our sojourn in the culture is short or long, if we can achieve competence in our cross-cultural communicative skills we will not only be able to dwell in the land of the stranger comfortably, but we will be able to facilitate smooth journeys into ours.

The aim of this thesis has been to show how some of the practices of Zen Buddhism can aid both the development and maintenance of the skills necessary for cross-cultural communicative competence. If we keep Zen mind, maintain Right Thinking, Right Effort, and Right Mindfulness we will develop that competence. Such competence is of immeasurable help in our classroom practice and our relationship with our students. We will also be taking one more of the eight steps on the Buddha's Path: that of Right Livelihood. In simple terms, this means practicing our profession with honorable ethics.

It is a human's job to save all beings from suffering; easing communication with the other across cultural divides is one way to do this.

May all beings be happy.

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